

Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction



Summer 2000

Issue #14

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A New Linden Story in this Issue

Editorial Notes

by
Warren Lapine

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In my last editorial I spoke about my commitment to the science fiction field. This issue's editorial will be similar in tone. I'm almost beginning to feel like a Johnny One Note, but with DNA Publications' purchase of *Science Fiction Chronicle* I would be remiss not to write about my plans for it. I'm very happy and excited to be able to add this important magazine to the fold. With it DNA Publications can do a great deal of good for the entire science fiction field.

Last editorial I spoke about what I thought was the major problem with science fiction magazine publishers. That is not the only problem SF faces. Another major problem for us to overcome is that the people who do the purchasing of science fiction for the retail stores and libraries by and large don't really understand science fiction. That means they often make terrible buying decisions that can have a negative affect on our field. If a local library does not have a very good science fiction section, what do you think the chances are that the next generation of kids will fall in love with science fiction at there? Not very good, I'm afraid. And ignorant store clerks who don't know which books to order for their retail stores can have an even greater affect on us. Once a science fiction fan has decided that a specific store doesn't have a good science fiction selection, they don't tend to return to that store. Over time this leads the store managers to believe erroneously that science fiction's popularity has slipped and they shrink the size of the section, further exacerbating the problem.

What can science fiction as a field do about this? Conventional wisdom has been that we can do very little. I believe that in this case conventional wisdom is just plain wrong. I plan to use *Science Fiction Chronicle* to educate both librarians and the people who make buying decision for book stores. How will I do this? First, I'll start by running articles on how to market science fiction books for the stores and as well as articles about science fiction aimed at librarians. Then I'll give *Science Fiction Chronicle* away to anyone whose job it is to buy books for a bookstore or order books for a library. It is my belief that if we can educate the people on that end of this equation, science fiction will once again flourish as it has in the past. I'm very excited about what we can do for science fiction, I believe that together we can turn this thing around. To that end, I'd like your help. We need addresses of book stores and libraries. If you could take a moment and send us the addresses of the stores that you buy your books from as well as the address of your local public library we'll do the rest. No more pessimism—it's time that someone take a stand. DNA Publications is raising up the banner, I hope that the science fiction field will rally around us as we take a stand. A new day has dawned.

This issue is dedicated to the memory of Joe Mayhew.

Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction

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Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction

Summer 2000

Issue #14

Broken Butterflies by Denise Lopes Heald	3
Virtual Daughter by Linda J. Dunn	17
Blockade Runner by Jamie Wild	31
Changelling by Sharon Lee and Steve Miller	45

Features:

Primary Ignition by Allen Steele	11
And Now Our Lead Story	
Joe Mayhew by Warren Lapine	66
(A Memorial)	
Book Reviews	67
Contributors Page	71

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D.E.H. '00

Broken Butterflies

Denise Lopes Heald

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Slap. Crimson blur exploded against my flight helmet; and my boots skidded in the landing field's dust as I ducked, staggered, and scrubbed at my faceplate, until red blur resolved into fluttering butterflies and my crashed cargo lander.

Slap. My heart thundered and my breather squealed. Blood plugged my nose and my chest felt as if I had landed on it.

Butterflies—I clenched my teeth to stop their chattering and limped toward my lander. It stank of overheated engine tiles and fried insect guts. Smashed black bodies—as thick around as my little finger—and shattered red wings coated the lander's nose cone and bled from its intake jets. The planet's famous *Giant Royal Crimson Fritillaries* had nearly killed me.

The shakes hit, and my vision kaleidoscoped into jungle-green, sky-blue, dirt-beige, and butterfly-red. Easy, I thought. But my bodyliner was wet at the crotch, my nose bled, and a wash of adrenaline made me crazy. If I had died delivering a load of farm tech and snack food to this poverty plagued, out-back-and-behind planet, Dad wouldn't even claim my remains. *Dear Sir, We regret to inform you that Rand Tomas was killed by butterflies.* Dad would say, *Serves the stupid coward right.*

Palm-sized wings fluttered in front of my visor. I ducked and my vision reeled: I was burning down, fighting for control of the lander, couldn't breathe, couldn't see through heat ripples or the red blobs that whacked the view screen while Port Control screamed, *Drop your load, idiot.*—the lander's clogged air jets whined... crisis lights glowed across my console—

Slap. A butterfly bounced off my visor.

I wheezed and fought off the flashback. I had taken statistically illogical chances against autonav's prompting, but my cargo and I were down and intact with a yellow emergency pillow collapsed beneath the lander. I opened my faceplate.

A breeze stirred my hair while. In the distance, sirens wailed. I was down, I told myself again. Help was coming and there was no need for shaking and hallucinating. But between the sirens' screams and the bug noise, I heard voices... singing.

I wobbled around and faced insanity's near cousin. From the flowering fern and fruit palm jungle that surrounded Port Thomas's dusty flight field, a helter-skelter parade of people in tourist clothes, laborers' overalls, and port uniforms gamboled toward me. They sang, tapped tambourines, and waved palm fronds over their heads. As the parade neared me, it faltered and only a single man, who neither sang nor danced, continued on.

Thinned to muscles, the guy moved lose-jointed with his arms limp at his sides like a fighter recovering from a hard punch.

I said, "Wha..."

He stopped beside my transport and scraped a gooey glob of black body and red wings from the ship's cowl.

"Hey, uh..." I snuffled air and blood.

Cupped in the man's hand the mangled butterfly's wings caught the morning sunlight and burst into crimson glare.

I blinked, wiped at streaming tears, and blinked again. Where a broken butterfly had lain, a whole one floated skyward from the guy's fingertips.

If his followers were singing now, I couldn't hear them over the wail of approaching sirens.

The butterfly guy smiled and scooped up another blobbed mess. He was young, scraggly bearded, with a mane of greasy hair chopped short around his face. I had seen neater looking beggars. But an expression of utter peace made him almost beautiful as his hands glowed with sunlight and—

Another live butterfly lifted from his fingers.

I sat straight down in the dust and my teeth nipped my lip. Next time, I promised to warn myself before I collapsed.

The sirens cut off and the crowd around me burst into song. Maybe I'd hit my head. Maybe I was dead after all.

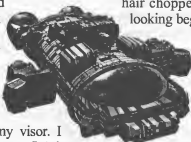
A fat man in a rescue uniform with *Chief* printed across his helmet, stepped from the cab of a floater and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. Surrounded by the butterfly-resurrection and folk-song revival, we stared at my cargo hauler.

"Son," the chief said, "that landing was the dumbest thing I've ever seen." He patted my back. "You did good. But you should've dumped the load."

66 **H**ey, incredible, sir." Hands clapped my shoulder as a group of local pilots passed my counter seat. "Yeah, skeet landing," a second added. "Would have splattered, myself."

I held my breath. I didn't need reminding about how close I'd come to dying this morning.

The pilots continued on to the café's teller and in the seat beside me Karalee studied the last meaty rib on her plate. Port Thomas's Café served the best food in this sector of space and had decor to match. Its window walls looked out on verdant jungle and potted ferns, vines, and epiphytes trailed from its ceiling niches. Karalee licked barbecue sauce from her scarred fingers. She had scanned the Info Net-coverage of my crash and decided to rescue an old friend.



Absolute Magnitude

My heart went nuts when she walked into the medical facility. But in firmer control of my senses now, I wasn't sure how I felt about being rescued. What was Karalee doing on Port Thomas? She wasn't a small loads handler like me; and she seemed awfully glad to see me, considering our last parting.

The way her lips moved as she licked her fingers again and the way her eyes studied me, gave my strained heart no rest.

Karalee navigated the big ships. We crewed together during the last Settlement War on a megamasser that ferried small cargo haulers into systems where I and a bunch of other grunts shuttled supplies from the ship to troops on freshly liberated planets. She and I became friends mainly because she found my stories about these warp-shoal planets and their egg-centric inhabitants exotic and funny. When she went civilian after six months, I assumed I would never see her again. But we chanced onto each other at Starbase's central rest and recreation facility during one of my furloughs. Two years later, I retired from the military, and we somehow had run into each other eight times over the last five years . . . even started up a casual physical relationship. At least, it was casual on her part.

She wasn't pretty, tended to be ill-tempered, and had broken a man's back once with her bare hands. But all the healthy skin and muscle she wore and the flash in her eyes drove men crazy. Besides, she was brilliant at her work, protected her friends, and laughed at times like a star angel. So fighter pilots lined up at her door even now that she navved civilian megamassers, and why she had time for a cargo pilot was a mystery to me.

But our haphazard relationship seemed convenient for her until I ruined it. What had I said that wiped the smile from her face? I had known she wouldn't hang around forever, but I missed her this past year . . . really missed her.

She broke my train of thought by continuing our interrupted conversation. "They call him the Butterfly Jesus or just BJ," she said. "He's been doing this trick for three weeks now."

Had she been on planet that long? She claimed that what Port Thomas's promotionals called The Crimson Storm had lured her to vacation here. Even I had to admit that fritillaries were pretty, but I wouldn't rank a butterfly flight high on Karalee's list of *things to see*; which brought me back to why she was on Port Thomas. After she accused me of loving my ships better than people, she called me an idiot to end our last vacation. So I'd figured she would be in a marriage contract before I saw her again, if I saw her. How soon before she tired of my ugly face, bad manners, and smart attitude this time?

She keyed her autoserve and a glass of milk rose onto the counter. "When a flyer lands," she said, "BJ brings the RCs that it hits back to life." She drained her milk in one go.

"You don't believe that?"

"You said you saw it."

"I could hardly breathe. I hallucinated."

"Well, everybody else in this port has seen him do it. So don't count yourself special."

I had never done the latter. I opened my mouth to argue, but the café door irised open and a crowd of civilians squeezed inside with Port Thomas's *Butterfly Jesus* leading the parade again. As the man limped past, I caught a backwash of body odor and jungle rot that rocked me on my stool. What a savior . . . But watching the show, I pitied the guy. His chattering sycophant crowded him into a booth, in spite of his stench, and ordered him so much food he could never eat it. I dug into my dish of fiddleneck pie, but kept watching. Huddled like a beaten pet, BJ didn't say a word or even look at his companions.

Karalee grunted. "They hound him. Last week Port Authority locked him up for two days so he could rest . . . only let him go because he started crying about the butterflies."

"Looks like it's time for another lockup."

"Yeah." She glared at the people surrounding the Butterfly Jesus. "Everybody wants something from him. See the guy with the slick suit?"

The man seated across the table from BJ wore an expensive bodysuit and haircut.

Karalee said, "He's an Entertainment Net producer here to cover the butterfly flight. He's trying to convince BJ to star in a weekly Net program . . . something like, *Wings of Salvation*." Karalee's jaw knotted. "But BJ won't sign a release."

"Why not? He looks as if he could use the credit."

"He doesn't care about that. He won't even talk to the guy . . . doesn't talk to anyone hardly."

"Hardly? Who does he talk to?"

She showed passion fruit cobbler in her mouth and worked jaws that looked as if they could burst an enclosure field.

I nudged her elbow. "Karl? Who does BJ talk too?"

"He talks to me. All right?"

"To you?" I smiled.

Her fist clenched on the counter.

I wiped the smile from my face. "No problem, Karl."

She couldn't be serious? I glanced at BJ. He was curled into a ball now against the view wall, knees tucked up, head tucked down, arms shielding his ears. I ignored an urge to toss bodies out the front door and give the poor bastard some peace.

"Hey!" The café hostess barreled toward BJ's table. His food had arrived by autoserve, but so many people leaned on and over the table that he couldn't eat. "Find your own booth and order or hit the sunlight. Now."

BJ's followers slipped toward the café's doors, other booths, and counter seats until the bedraggled miracle worker sat alone with the Entertainment producer and two delicate and professionally redesigned women. I'd have liked a taste of either girl. But BJ only held a platter to his face and gulped food. Yellow sauce dribbled from his chin and a glob of casserole slid down his shirt front.

I glanced at Karalee, saw her fixated on her cobbler, and didn't dare ask her another thing.

Broken Butterflies

I took the bungalow nearest Karalee's at the far edge of Port Thomas's landing field. Until I healed, the arrangement was as close as I dared come to sleeping with her. Similar shacks dotted Port Thomas to house the tourists who came to watch the RCs or royal crimsons flutter south in the spring or north in the fall. Emerald-green jungle crowded the back of my shack and insects of every description crowded the interior. But, since I'd landed on planet on official duty, the place came rent free; and I owned a body shield that blanketed me in an electrical skin impenetrable to the majority of the planet's bug life. So home-sweet-home was where you made it.

Still aching from my crash landing, I rolled onto a puff-pad, tugged a thermal up to my chest, and faded into a lullaby of chirping bugs and cooing night birds.

Splat. My nerves misfired. I sucked a breath and came out of nightmare with my mind whirling and engine jets screaming—

Damn coward, Dad said. He often visited me during confused awakenings. *Quitter.* Dad hated quitters. I let the bugs and birds drown out Dad's voice while I drifted toward sleep again.

"Kara?"

The call startled me. My ribs stabbed pain and my chest knotted. I croaked, "What?"

"Oh . . . excuse me." The disembodied voice sounded embarrassed. "I'm looking for Karalee."

"Uhh, yeah." I relaxed my hold on the stunner beneath my sleep pad and back breathed. "Next door." Someone was a whole lot braver than me.

"Thanks—"

I flashed my area light and the man at the door ducked. Fast as he was, I recognized his ragged shirt before it disappeared into exterior darkness. It belonged to *The Butterfly Jesus*. Oh, gees-sus.

"Hey." I scrambled out of bed, staggered outside barefoot, and stepped straight down on a fern thorn. "*Kaaagggghh.*" My bellow startled the night bugs to silence.

"You all right?" The guy spoke right at my elbow.

Startled anew, I leaped for the sky and landed in his arms. My breath rushed out. "I got it," I said, but hopped on one foot and steadied against him. "Hey. Hey, you don't stink so bad." I may be a coward, but my social finesse sees me through.

"You don't stink so bad yourself." He laughed, the sound rich and deep. "Sorry about at the café. If I don't do something to back people off, the *believers* smother me."

"Why not tell them to dissipate?"

"Anything I say they turn into a proverb or something else stupid. So I don't talk."

"Yeah." I hobbled onto a bench that leaned near the shack's door. "How come you're talking to me then?"

"Karalee says you're an atheist."

"Hhmmh." I turned the sole of my foot toward the light that streamed from inside my shack.

BJ bent over to look. "Whoa. That's a big one." He dropped on one knee, grabbed the base of the thorn in my heel, and pulled without warning.

A yelp swelled in my throat . . . but there was no pain.

"Uhh." I ran the tip of my tongue over my front teeth.

"Uhh, what you just do there, BJ?"

"Fixed it." He sounded mortified.

I bent over my upturned foot. There wasn't a drop of blood, not even a red spot.

"Sorry." He stood and backed. "Sorry. Didn't mean— Sorry." His shadowed face wore an expression of near panic as he disappeared into the night.

"Hey!"

I heard Karalee's porch creak, heard the murmur of her voice, and there was no following him.

"Up an' chargin', A-hole!"

The shack shook and I rattled out of a dream about the two pretties who had sat with BJ yesterday. Karalee's blunt features jarred those delicate visions into oblivion.

"I gotta sleep, Karl." My voice sounded as if gravel had hardened in my throat overnight.

"Unh-uh. We're watching butterflies today."

"Saw'em, dear. Too-too close." My voice quavered and I rooted into my pillow again.

"You haven't seen them like you'll see them today." Her hand gripped my shoulder and flopped my head back.

I gazed at her upside-down figure. "Please?" I smiled as wide as I could with my teeth gritted.

"Up, space hog."

When I hiked up into forest, taking The Falls Trail to Canyon View; where grass ferns, bright yellow epiphytes, and flower-dappled moss spilled down sheer rock walls. My ribs hurt; but Karalee had cleared trail for me all the way, stopped three times to let me rest, and I was glad she had drug me out of my shack. Resting again, I sat with my feet over the canyon's rim while the far-off river's damp breath rose in my face.

I gathered my nerve. Neither the incredible beauty facing me nor my fear of alienating Karalee again was enough to squelch my curiosity. "What's with you and BJ?" Who says I'm a coward?

Karalee's eyes narrowed and her hand clenched. "We talk."

Water rushed and boomed below and the loamy scents of the jungle tingled my sinuses. "Yeah. But who and what is he?" I tossed a stray bird's feather into the wind. "He looks and acts like a wild man. But last night, when he mistook my cabin for yours, he enunciated just fine."

Karalee frowned. "His name's Jacob McCallister Smith." She toed a stone into space and watched it fall. "He's an ex-battle wagon navver," she said. "He helped kill a lot of people during the war . . . doesn't talk about it. I dug his name and

Absolute Magnitude

history out of Mr. E-Net Producer. I think guilt's eating BJ up. He really is crazy sometimes."

Her body rocked and her gaze was so intent on the drop below that I wrapped my arm about her. She looked up, clearly startled, blinked, and said, "Do you understand about the butterfly stuff?" Her eyes were as green as the jungle.

I shook my head negative.

"Well, I do, sort of, being a navver myself," she said. "I think, since navvers have the sympathetic chemical/neural hardware to sense out the energy trails we use to guide a ship through deep space, why can't we sense out similar trails in life forms? You near-space pilots use only demarcated flight paths, but you must sense the deeper wave sometimes don't you?"

I shrugged and looked away. I didn't like to think about what I sensed whenever I strayed off a signal-marked path into open space. It was like having grit in your shorts or grabbing a hot wire or . . . my skin crept and my nerves stood on end. Karalee didn't wait for an answer anyway.

"See," she said. "What if BJ senses life force energy and leads it back into the butterflies and speeds up their healing before they die? You know, he doesn't bring them all back to life, just some. He senses the ones that aren't exactly dead yet. I know he was a superior navver, because he didn't stay military through the war because he wanted to kill. They kept him. He's only been out a year. They *lost* his file—" Her voice descended into a growl. "—and left him undocumented until after the signing of the Peace Accord so that he couldn't get out. He's talked about that some. They made him kill. They killed most of him."

Karalee's bottom lip stiffened. No one hated killing more than she did. She had lived through the invasion of Skyraven as a civilian and was the only one of her family to survive. I sucked the hole I had chomped in my tongue yesterday. Dad would have lost my records and kept me in the military forever if he had control over such matters. Dad would love BJ.

"Hey?" Karalee's arm slid around me.

I looked up.

"Where are you?"

I shook my head.

She said, "Look, you asked and I talked. You owe me. But forget that now and forget what your father thinks." It seemed Karalee could read my mind now. "The war is over, Rand. You did enough in your turn. There's no reason to keep gnawing at it."

"I served my regulation stint," I said, "that's all."

"Don't lie. You served it twice because they put a hardship on your discharge orders."

Now how did she know that?

"Besides, you served both stints right through the heart of the war and earned a commendation for completing more supply missions under more severe fire than anyone else on record."

I looked away. "That wasn't what Dad had planned for me . . . no peripheral combat duty for the Commodore's son."

"Your dad's an ass. You know, I've met him."

I hadn't known.

"He rode passenger on one of my ships."

My jaw had gone stiff. I forced it open. "Did he tell you that he gave his entire life to the military and expected nothing less of me. I understand him being disappointed."

"Well, you shouldn't." She gave me a shove and stared into the canyon some more. "You did enough."

Had I done enough? And what now? Did I keep working freighters for whoever paid the highest, when none of them paid much above a living wage, while risking my life like yesterday?

"I've been thinking of getting out of space," I said.

"And do what?"

Her tone and expression threw me. She sounded as if I must be joking, but also as if she hoped I wasn't.

"A . . ." I choked and swallowed. "An experienced load handler can find port work somewhere."

"Sure. But you hate sitting in place."

"Do I?"

"You're always the first one to leave Starbase. You get bored on vacation and take off. Just like last time."

"Last time? You left?"

"You made me. I couldn't stand looking at your back one more time. You knew where my conversation was leading and you started checking flight schedules out of there. I saw you."

I stared into the canyon and wondered if I should jump. She was right: I did always leave Starbase before she could and I was checking schedules the day she stormed out on me.

"I don't get bored, Karl. I figured you might want time to yourself on vacation. I was trying to be polite." —and not push my luck; her leaving first was my worst nightmare.

She socked my shoulder and I gritted my teeth against pain.

"You," she said, "are always too nice, you air-sucking idiot. I like being with you just as long as you'll stay."

I wasn't nice. What did she mean? I stared at her and she looked like a stranger. I said, "What was that about I *knew* where your conversation was headed?"

"I said I wanted to get married someday to a nice guy. Then you went pale and started edging away. I'm not that ugly."

My mouth opened, but just hung there. It took two tries before I said, "You meant . . . we should contract?"

Her face reddened. "I wanted to ask you what you thought."

I hugged my bruised ribs and emptied my lungs by force of will. My whole adult life I had figured that women came in two kinds: the ones who didn't interest me for longer than a night or the ones that weren't interested in staying with me past the end of my pay credits. I knew Karalee wasn't after my nonexistent fortune; but it didn't make sense that a superior navver like her would be serious about me.



Broken Butterflies

I said, "Karl, you are not ugly. I thought you meant you were marrying someone else. Why would you want me?"

She punched me again, but not as hard. "You are lax," she said. "Why would an intelligent woman not be interested in you? Do you think I'm stupid? You think I want some reflex-brained fighter pilot?"

My mouth opened again.

Karalee raised a fist. "You do!" she said. "You think I want a killer jock." She hit me so hard that she had to grab me before I fell into the canyon. Then she shook me. "How can a smart man be so stupid? It took me a while to figure you out, but that's because you hide, not because you're complicated."

Her grip relaxed. She let go of me and seemed suddenly shy. But she met my stunned stare.

"In a way, you're right," she said. "I do want an adrenaline-addicted powerjet-sucker pilot. I want you."

My heart thumped as if it had hit a wall. Karalee was either playing a nasty joke or she had lost her mind. I'd never known here to be a joker. I said, "I jockey farm supplies, Karl. And I've run out of new places to do that. So how long will you be interested in a guy telling you the same stories about the same places over and over again?"

Her lips parted and she stared at me until I looked away. She said, "Is that why you didn't come to Starbase for your last break? Because you ran out of stories?"

"I didn't think you would be there." I stared into the canyon, wanting to say that she didn't understand me at all. But I couldn't find a thing that she had said wrong yet, except for the bit about marrying me. "You really want kids?" The words were out before I could stop them.

She shifted at my side. "I want yours."

I relaxed a degree. This made more sense, sort of. "You don't have to marry me for that, Karl. I'll give you my kids. I can't raise any the way I live."

"That's what I want to stop..."

"Slow down. If we do have kids, then I can't afford to quit flying now."

"That's not what I meant."

I tried to meet her gaze, but this time she looked away.

"I want," she said, "to change the way you *don't* live." Her lower lip trembled and I felt lightheaded. "Rand." She met my stare again. "What you do is the most important thing I can imagine anyone doing. You bring food to hungry people, medicine, clothes, power units, equipment..." She drew a breath. "You keep places like this planet alive and do it where other people won't fly. You are the bravest man I know."

"The hell I am."

My skin crawled and my face burned. Karalee had created a nice romantic delusion about my job, which just showed how boring she would find its reality. I punched her and surprised us both.

She said, "If you don't believe me, then why do you fly cargo?"

I swallowed and shrugged. "I have a hard time sitting still." She half smiled at that, and I wrinkled my nose, trapped into admitting she was right. I hated talking about myself. People asked what you thought, but they weren't interested in your answer. Dad sure never was. But Karalee wouldn't look away, so I said, "See, I trained as a fighter pilot. I thought it would be fun, you know. Only the damn fighter zooms don't do anything but go fast; and maybe, once a week you go on patrol and fight the *enemy*—whoever that is. Or maybe you see nothing and just float around awhile before you return to base ship. Or maybe someone sneaks up and kills you before you know they're there. What is that? Zoom pilots get a load of glory every time there's a big firefight, but most of the time they just sit around waiting. At least pushing cargo, I fly all the time... and it's safe."

Karalee glared at me. "When has cargo flying been safe for you? Flying into a storm of butterflies wasn't safe! Clipping a mountain on Jarbidge delivering medical relief wasn't safe."

I never told her any stories about Jarbidge. Where had she found out all this stuff? What had Dad told her?

"You faker." She grabbed my arm, jerked me to my feet, and tall as I was, she stared me eye-to-eye. She said, "You fly cargo so you can do everyday what those glitz-nerved fighter pilots like to do once in a maybe. Fighters weren't enough for you. You want to push the edge *all* the time. So you get yourself assigned to the clumsiest flyers around, hauling the clumsiest cargos into the most dangerous drop zones, so you can test your skill and your luck everyday and kite your nerves from one end of the known universe to the other."

"That's crap..."

She moved in so close to me that it was hard to breathe past the heat rising off her breasts. "Listen," she said.

Her voice made my gut quiver and my nethers get excited. She was trying to arouse me so I would shut up. It worked.

"Is crashing farm equipment still a lot of fun?"

My breath caught. She had reached inside and grabbed the tenderest spot in me. "Karl..." The lie died out.

The look in her eyes said she wouldn't believe it anyway.

"Rand." Her fingers touched mine. "You've proved enough. You've done enough. Slow down. That's what I want to do, just slow down. If I'm always going to be scaring myself then it's time it accomplished something. I want kids, that's scary. But I want them and I want them in a family, because that's how I was raised, which is scariest yet."

I shivered. Her dead family had been everything to her. So now, she meant now that she was ready to heal her wounds and dare to love people again. I'd never had a family, just Dad.

"Rand?"

I blinked. With Dad for a model, I only knew how not to be a father. But to get Karalee to shut up, I said, "I'll think about it. Can you really give up spooking through space?"



Absolute Magnitude

"Yeah." She said it in a faint little girl's voice. "And I've credit enough saved up that you can quit playing crash dummy and do whatever you want. I figure you are the only man I know brave enough to maybe pledge with me."

I thought she was wrong, but this time, I wanted her to be right. I had loved her since the moment we met and I wanted to grab hold of her muscled body now and just hang on. Except, I would be stupid to believe that marriage's familiarity wouldn't ruin our friendship.

"Come on." She tugged on my hand. "Let's see some butterflies."

My feet had never ached so much and I had never cared less about physical pain before. *Crimson* storm didn't begin to invoke the beauty of a stream of RCs fluttering and floating from horizon to horizon, backdropped by moisture-bejeweled jungle, everything aglitter with sunlight, air filling your lungs that was so rich and pure it made you drunk. In spite of the scare Karalee had given me about marriage, our day had been fine and wondrous. Now her hands kneaded my shoulders as she stood behind me on the porch of her shack. Potted plants hung from the shed-roof's rafters and a thick cushion padded the bench beneath me. Karalee looked to have set up house keeping while waiting for my regular route stop on Port Thomas.

"Glad you got up for the hike, Big Boy?"

She flattered me with the *Big Boy*. She was a good inch taller than me. But I maybe outweighed her.

"I'm glad," I said.

She laughed, wrapped a forearm around my shoulders, and hugged me hard. It felt incredibly good. Sitting like this, without immediate deadlines or schedules—the lander still in repair—felt good too. A bird cooed in the dusk and a glow beetle flashed a neon love signal from a fern branch while monkeys chattered in the scrub. I breathed deep.

"Like it here?" An odd tension rode Karalee's question.

"Yeah." After our earlier discussion, I kept my tone noncommittal.

"We could live here."

"As in forever?"

"Yeah."

"I landed on a crash pad, woman, not my head." But I stretched up and kissed her cheek.

"Thanks." She hugged me again. "We better get to the sani before they run out of warm water. I'll scrub your back."

Her comment was casual and flirty and that made me relax. Maybe we could go back to playing our old games and forget her idea about a marriage contract. Maybe in the cool of the day, she had begun to regret her offer. I said, "Race you."

"Like hell, cripple."

A crowd outside the Port Café blocked our way to the showers. Limping, I tried to skirt the party, but Karalee hung back. At the heart of a circle of assorted laborers, jungle gleaners, and tourists in baggy red-and-blue butterfly pants, BJ, dirtier than ever, faced a woman with a baby in her arms.

"Please." The woman's voice scaled into a whine. "Please. You can bring the butterflies back."

The baby's cry sounded weak and fretful.

BJ stared at the ground.

"Hey, bastard." A bearded gleaner cursed at BJ. "Look at her, man. You think butterflies are more important than a baby?"

BJ's head raised. His eyes were pools of pain. His ragged lower lip sucked in and he raised a hand to the baby.

It mewled and BJ's hand fell. "I—"

The mother burst into tears and the mouthy gleaner's face turned redder than an RC. "You sona'bitchin' fake."

"He's a fake!" The crowd took up the cry and a rotten stink fruit splattered BJ's chest.

"Help me!" The mother yanked on his arm. "I can't afford the meds' treatments. Help us!"

I thought about BJ pulling the thorn from my heel. After listening to Karalee's explanation of how BJ healed butterflies, I could begin to believe that a burst of mental energy from the man might accelerate my healing to the point of seeming instantaneous; but this baby's hurt must be genetic



Broken Butterflies

or else the local medicals would have cured it already. So BJ couldn't just "heal" its damaged flesh; what was wrong with it was what it was. To "heal" it would be to remake it. . . .

The crowd surged toward him and a fist caught BJ's chin.

"No!" Karalee bulled forward, flattening tourists.

I ducked my shoulder to follow her and noticed the E-Net producer and his pretties. Disgust twisted the man's features. He wouldn't pester BJ about doing a special anymore.

Karalee started boxing it out with two jungle women and a port laborer. I ducked beneath flying fists and the gleaner stomping BJ's face met my boot with his crotch.

"Stop! Stop it!" My throat tore. "Are you all crazy?"

The crowd froze and I froze. These people had come demanding miracles from a madman and now they looked at me as if I might spout a magic formula to get them whatever it was that they wanted here this evening.

"The baby needs more therapy than this place can give," I jerked a hand toward the port facility buildings. "He needs a gene scan. That will work as big a miracle as any this man could and it's a miracle we can all make happen."

The mother with the sick baby stood amongst a knot of weathered-looking women in gatherers' clothes. I pulled the only cash credits I had on me from my belt and dropped them atop the listless child in her arms. Bodies shifted and the jungle's heat hit me like a weight. I held still, expecting to get hit by worse than heat. But someone said my name. Then someone else repeated it and a murmur spread through the crowd.

"Hey." A yell sounded from the pack. "I saw this man land a cargo ship yesterday with only four jets working. He knows about miracles. Use sense. Let's help the baby ourselves."

People eased back and the tourists in the crowd started hunting a way to avoid being caught in this miracle. But the locals carried them forward as the crowd surged around the mother and dropped cash on the baby.

A squad of Port Authority guards chugged up then and Karalee and I carried BJ off with their help.

At Port Medical, I watched Karalee watching BJ while the medics patched him up for free and I decided that I had lost her. This afternoon I as good as refused her marriage proposal; and now, instead of fighting for BJ, I had bought and tricked my way out of trouble. It wasn't wrong, but I felt foolish about giving that speech. Earlier, I had argued for Karalee to see me for the boring grunt pilot that I was. But I wanted more than anything not to have driven the point home.

A guard escorted the three of us to the port's big sani. After showering, we took BJ to Karalee's shack and tucked him into her bunk. BJ hadn't said a thing since his rescue.

Karalee and I stepped outside.

She said, "Thank you for saving Jacob."

"I didn't do anything." I kicked a nine-legged dust crab off the bungalow's porch.

"You made that crowd stop fighting and listen to you."

"I don't know why they did."

"Respect."

"Yeah, crap."

Karalee took my hand. "Idiot, think for once. This place is no paradise. Those people depend on pilots like you; and they admire a guy that's no flash or bravado, just guts and business."

She leaned forward and kissed my lips. The sensation was different from any other kiss we had ever shared and I hugged her until she knew I could break backs too. She touched me back with just the perfect amount of pressure.

When I sat/lay limp beneath her on the porch's lounge, Karalee said, "I've been given a medical retirement. They don't want me in the Merchant Fleet anymore." Her jaw was hard as steel against my bare shoulder. "They say I came close to losing my last ship because I turned the wrong way."

"Did you?"

Her breath sucked in. "Yeah. I felt this great big wave. It wasn't the right one, but I wanted to follow it."

I held her and held her. Oh, Karalee . . . she needed to make a miracle out of disaster. No wonder she liked Jacob.

"Why don't you marry BJ?" Why couldn't I keep my mouth shut? Did I want to chase her away again? My stomach tightened up. But either she liked me being honest or nothing would work. Dad loved me all those years for what he thought I would become, not for what I was.

She shook her head. "He and I are too much alike. It wouldn't take much for him to make me as crazy as he is. Besides, I don't love him."

My heart fluttered. "Kar—"

Inside her cabin, BJ screamed. We scrambled to him trailing loose clothes.

"Kid." Karalee knelt beside Jacob Smith. "Kid?"

He was shaking. I wriggled into my pants and sat on the other side of his bunk.

"Tr-ried . . ." His face was drawn to bone and tendon and his teeth clicked. Where I'd shaved him earlier, his skin glowed ghost pale in the bungalow's twilight.

I said, "Breathe, kid."

He sucked a shuddering breath and Karalee and I hugged him from opposite sides.

"Tr-tr-ried . . ." He sobbed.

His silken hair smelled of soap and fear sweat. Someone needed to take care of this fool full-time.

"Easy." Karalee stroked his tear-stained cheek. "Don't let them do this to you. Don't. None of them could heal that baby. There's no reason to think you can. A little kinetic puff to regenerate a butterfly, close a scratch, that's a miracle in itself. They're greedy blind fools if that's not enough."

I froze. If that's not enough? How did you please anyone when simple miracles weren't enough?

Something unwound in me like a coiled key, something that had been knotted for so long I felt as if all my organs floated free now and pumped with life for the first time since the war began. If simple miracles weren't enough, people didn't deserve pleasing. Maybe my father didn't— But Karalee's discussion of raising a family had brought back

Absolute Magnitude



memories of my father's smiles and rare hugs. I had pleased him sometimes.

I stood.

"Rand?"

I ignored Karalee's touch and walked outside, walked across the darkened landing field, walked on feet that burned like fire.

The first two flyers I reached had already been cleaned and polished, but the third sported spattered butterflies on its nose. I gathered the least mangled bodies and headed back.

Karalee's head raised as I entered the shack again. At her side, Jacob stirred. I opened my cupped hands. With one eye swollen shut from his beating and the other puffy from crying, Jacob blinked and his bottom lip trembled.

"It's all right." I tipped my hands. "Go ahead."

A tear slipped down his cheek and his lip disappeared between his teeth... but he touched a butterfly. It glowed.

Jacob's face transformed into peace and I shivered as a perfect Giant Royal Crimson Fritillary took flight from my hands.

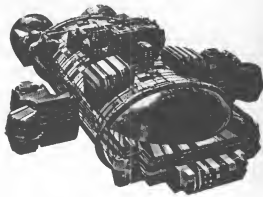
My heart flew with it. Jacob had done enough. He had done too much, had his sanity broken by official perversion. Karalee? Karalee had earned her home a long time ago. Me? I wasn't ashamed of the things I had done. Why should I be ashamed of things I hadn't done?

"I like this planet," I said. "I think I'll stay."

Karalee looked up. "Forever?"

"For as long as our family is here."

She closed her eyes and looked for once very delicate. I glanced at BJ. He wasn't the only one who could work miracles. If I never did any more good than give Karalee a family, still I had at last done enough. And somewhere in my childhood memories of my father before he stopped believing in simple miracles, I could learn to raise my family whole and strong and free to fly however and wherever their wings took them. I could even forgive their grandfather, which was a wonder in itself; because a person had to make their own miracles and I hoped that he would yet.



Primary Ignition

Jake's Last Stand

by Allen Steele

This is a sad story. I've put off writing it for nearly four months now, and at times I've wondered if I should relate it at all. The death of a close friend is a personal matter, after all, and never an easy subject to address, and there may be times when my words will not be sufficient. Yet there may be something you can learn from this, and perhaps telling it will ease my heartbreak.

Jake passed away on Tuesday, October 14, the day after the Columbus Day weekend. He held on as long as he could, fighting his illness with courage and grace until the very end. It was not until his final days that he showed any signs of being in pain, and even then he tried not to be a burden upon anyone. In the last week of his life, he continued doing all the things he liked to do; my wife and I took him to Northampton where he visited his favorite places, and when he walked down the street he did so with his head held high. He also saw most of his neighborhood friends one last time; Winston was too ill to leave the house, but the Stud dropped by every day to see how he was doing, and Wally often came over from next door. And when he was at home, his adopted brothers Zack and Laclede were never far from his side. Jake was a big-hearted soul, and his pals repaid his friendship in kind.

Yet in the end, even his incredible will to live could not hold off the inevitable. The cancer which had plagued him for nearly eleven months had spread from his right nostril into his sinus cavity, dissolving cartilage and bone as it made its inexorable way toward his brain. Jake's forehead swelled, forcing his eyes to close to narrow slits through which he could barely see; when I touched his head, even lightly, he would recoil from

my hand and whimper a bit, yet never once did he bare his teeth or snap. And his nosebleeds became almost continuous; at times he was seized with convulsive sneezing fits which sprayed blood and small bits of tissue across the floor.

On the last day of his life, he went out in the backyard for his morning business; when he returned from the woods behind



our house, emerging from the thick autumn fog which lingered above the hilltop, I saw that he was walking slowly, his head low to the ground. Almost blind now, he followed my voice to the back porch steps, but he had no appetite for the cookie I offered him, and even the simple act of drinking water had become painful. It was then that I realized that the time had come.

Jake was eight years, four months, and nearly two weeks old on the day he died. He was a dog, yes, but he was also one of the most courageous individuals I've ever known.

When Linda and I first met Jake, he was a scrawny, malnourished puppy, alone in

a pen at the Animal Protective Association of Missouri, an animal shelter in St. Louis not far from the house we'd bought a couple of months earlier.

We already had one dog—Zack, the three-year-old Golden Retriever-collie mix whom we had adopted while living in New Hampshire—but he had picked me to be his companion and Linda desired a canine confidante of her own. Now that we had our own house with a fenced-in back yard and a dog-door in the appliance room behind the kitchen, we were in the position to adopt a second dog. So we trooped down the APA and went looking through the pens for someone Linda could adopt.

Jake was no show dog. With coarse black fur unevenly streaked with a brown mane and a spotted tongue, there was no easy way to tell what breed he was: part German Shepherd, obviously, but after that his lineage was anyone's guess. Indeed, he didn't even have a name before he was picked up by the APA. He was the runt of a litter which had come from a white-trash family in south St. Louis; no one had wanted to take this particular mutt, so his owners had tied him to a post in their backyard and pretty much left him out there to die. A next-door neighbor became aware of the pup's misery by his incessant barking and called the APA, and the little guy was soon rescued from the rednecks. All anyone knew for certain about him was his birthday: April 1, 1991. But he swabbed Linda's face with his tongue when she picked him up and urinated on her sneakers when she put him down, and after that it was love at first sight. By the time we left the APA we'd signed his adoption papers and arranged for him to be neutered and vaccinated, and two days later he came home with us.

Absolute Magnitude

Like any dog who had been abused early in life, Jake was difficult to raise. He had violent tantrums during which he'd destroy anything he could get his jaws upon, and he had a mean streak which made him difficult to punish; he sank his teeth in my hands more than once. Linda took him to a puppy-training classes offered by a nearby kennel, where the trainer loftily pronounced him to be unteachable; he graduated at the bottom of his class. Once after he ripped apart a book I had left on the living room table, I chased him into the backyard and tried to kick him in the butt; he dodged me and I slammed my bare foot into the side of the deck. I broke my middle toe and had to hobble around with a walking stick for the next three weeks. We both learned our lessons; he never chewed up another book, and I never tried to kick him again.

As he got older, though, Jake mellowed out and became a very sweet-tempered dog. Although he suffered from long-bone disease as a puppy—that's a genetic trait in some dogs which causes their hind legs and tails to grow faster than the rest of their bodies—he eventually lost his gawkiness. When he was about four months old, we took him to visit my family's summer house in Tennessee, and there I taught him how to swim. On my bedroom wall is a small watercolor my sister Lilli painted of us; we're in the water together, face to face, dog-paddling in Center Hill Lake. After that, there was no pond, river, or creek which he didn't want to dive into.

He was also an excellent ball-player. We started playing catch in the back yard when he was still a puppy, and by the time he reached adulthood he had become amazingly agile, able to leap several feet above the ground to snatch tennis balls in midair as they rebounded off the back fence. Indeed, he was obsessed with balls. On the summer evenings he'd curl up with Linda on the living room couch and watch Cardinals games on TV, and once while we were in the park he broke from his leash and

dashed out into the softball diamond to intercept a grounder which a Little Leaguer had knocked into center field.

Yet there was one bad habit of which we could never break him, and that was sniffing. Jake sniffed everything in sight; when we walked him on his leash, he would barely lift his head, his snout remaining fixed upon the ground as he scented every object that crossed his path: bushes, lamp posts, mail boxes, dog crap, litter, everything. His nose was his principal means of sensory input, even more so than his ears and ears. In the long run, that particular mannerism proved to be his undoing.

Webster Groves, the suburban township of St. Louis County where we lived, had strict local ordinances which dictated how home owners should maintain their yards. No satellite dishes, no sidewalk fences, no cars parked in the yard, so forth and so on. If you didn't mow your lawn for a couple of weeks and the grass grew higher than three inches, you could expect a stern letter from city hall. To make matters worse, the guy who lived two doors down had appointed himself as the neighborhood Yard Cop; if someone on our street failed to mow their lawn, he'd rat on them. Awfully righteous behavior for someone whom Linda once caught stealing the Sunday New York Times from our driveway.

All this made us self-conscious of our appearance, so when a door-to-door salesman dropped by to pitch a monthly lawn-care service, I took him up on the offer. Our lawn had huge patches of broad-leaf vine and dandelions which no amount of mowing or pulling had ever been able to remove, and the salesman promised that his company's four-step program of fertilization and reseeding would take solve the problem. Yet when we signed the contract, Linda stipulated that we wanted our back yard left alone; that was where Zack and Jake played, and we didn't want them near the chemical fertilizers.

Yet this instruction was ignored by the guy who came to spray the lawn, and since he always made his visits when Linda and I were gone, so he treated the back yard as well. One afternoon Linda returned home to find him spraying beneath the back deck. Jake had burrowed a small dug-out beneath the deck where he would curl up to keep himself cool during the humid summer months, and this moron was pumping chemicals into Jake's hole while the dog was down there. Linda chased him away, and shortly thereafter we canceled our service contract; it was expensive, and it didn't do a damn thing for our lawn either.

It wasn't very long after that, though, that we noticed that Jake was becoming a little more lethargic. He'd still play ball whenever he got a chance, and he was always ready for a walk around the block or a trip to the park, yet there were many afternoons when all he wanted to do was lie in his favorite chair and gaze out the front window. Zack was getting older, though, so he didn't want to play with him as much, and we still had yet to adopt Laclede, so I wrote it off as canine melancholy. Even when Jake occasionally sneezed, I thought it was simply a reaction to pollen.

Yet a biological time bomb had been set, and now the clock was beginning to tick.

By early 1997, Linda and I finally had enough of the Midwest. Although St. Louis was her home town and I enjoyed being close to Tennessee, both of us had come to regret leaving New England seven years earlier. A trip to western Massachusetts the previous November for a Guest of Honor appearance at a small SF convention had convinced us that the East Coast was our true home, and so the following spring we began the process of moving across the country. By late June, we had sold our house in Webster Groves, packed up our belongings, and relocated to a ridgetop house in a small town outside Northampton.

Primary Ignition

Linda quickly found a new job as a radio announcer at an alt-rock station in Northampton, and although I suffered writer's block for a few months, by the end of the year I was working again, producing short stories and developing my next novel. Zack, now 11 years old, quickly made friends with the neighborhood dogs, and Laclede, the black flat-coated retriever puppy whom Linda had found abandoned in downtown St. Louis several months earlier, was getting over his initial shyness and the shock of moving from the 'burbs to the country.

Jake had a hard time adjusting to his new life. Territorial by nature and accustomed to living behind a fence, he wasn't prepared for a place where he could roam freely. There are no leash laws in our town, and our neighborhood has almost as many dogs in it as people. On his third day in our new home, he challenged Lady, the female German Shepherd who lives across the road, and she promptly beat the crap out of him. He hid inside the house for next week, and it took several months for him to learn how to treat the other dogs who lived around us—Winston, Harley, Mookie, Sam, Wally, the Stud—as friends rather than adversaries. Yet they all became pals, and once we installed a dog-door in the mud room off the kitchen, our three dogs soon became paid-up members of the neighborhood dog patrol.

Early one morning in late autumn, I arose at dawn to open the mud room door and make coffee. While in the kitchen, I heard dogs barking from the back yard. A frost-fog lay over the hilltop, shrouding the pale orange sun rising over the distant mountains. Zack, Jake, and Laclede were seated next to each other, barking in cadence. As I watched through the window, dogs began to emerge from the mist. They all began to play together, and that was when I stopped worrying about Jake. He had become accepted. He would have a long and happy life here.

A year went by. Then, one morning in late October, 1998, Jake began to sneeze blood.

Two days earlier, he had a minor nosebleed. We had become accustomed to such things and had learned a few home remedies from several vets. A dog has an upset stomach and throws up his food? Squirt some Pepto-Bismol down his throat through a turkey baster. He pulls a leg muscle and limps around the house? Hide a Bufferin tablet in a piece of cheese and feed it to him. Did he lose a fight with a skunk? Wash him down with tomato juice, then rinse with warm water. Does he have a nosebleed? Wrap an ice cube in a paper towel and place it against his nostrils.

Yet this time, it wasn't a mere nosebleed. Now Jake was sneezing hard, his shaggy head violently twisting to left and right as he hurled bloody mucus across the floors, the walls, the cabinet doors. Clots were forming upon his nostrils, making it difficult for him to breathe; in panic, he began running through the house, leaving dark crimson trails across the rugs and bookcases.

Linda called our vet, and Robin told us to bring Jake in at once, so I bundled Jake into the back of my Subaru hatchback and broke a couple of speed laws racing down the mountain to her office in the next town. Robin ushered Jake into an inspection room and gave him a thorough examination. Linda had to handle a morning air-shift at her radio station, so I called her at work. Jake's okay, but Robin hasn't found the source of the problem. No, a thorn isn't lodged in his nostril or anything like that. I'll call you again when I know more.

Then Robin came out, and in grave tones informed me that this was a potentially serious situation, probably more than she or her husband Bud could handle. She strongly urged me to take Jake to the Tufts University veterinary clinic in Grafton; she could put in a call and have him accepted as an emergency patient. So I put Jake back in my car and we drove an hour and a half to Grafton. Blood was still dribbling from his nose,

but otherwise he was still the happy, fun-loving mutt he always was, thrilled as ever to be taking a car ride. I didn't know it at the time, but this would be the first of many trips we'd take together to Grafton.

The Tufts University Veterinary Medical Center is located on a handsome, leafy campus east of Worcester. The Foster Small Animal Hospital sits on a low hill across from the administration building; behind it are livestock pens for horses and cattle. The admission area is indistinguishable from the waiting room of any hospital emergency room, save that the floors and the lower half of the walls are covered with beige ceramic tile. A friendly woman behind the counter had already been informed we were coming; she quickly entered Jake into her computer, then a doctor—in his late thirties, wearing a spotless white lab coat—came out to meet us. He removed Jake's collar and bandanna, then slipped a nylon leash around his neck. The tests would take awhile, the doctor told me; if the X-rays revealed nothing, then they might have to give him a CAT-scan. Would I be willing to come back tomorrow? I gave Jake a hug and told him to be good, and he gave me a little lick on the hand before he obediently followed the doctor through a pair of swinging doors.

The next afternoon, Linda and I were seated in an antiseptic office. A translucent CAT-scan of the interior of Jake's skull which had been tacked up on a light board, and the doctor was gently explaining the results of the tests. Jake hadn't been brought out to us yet, which was probably just as well; when the doctor told us the bad news, Linda broke down in tears.

Jake had terminal cancer. He was dying.

It's a testament to the vast progress which medical science has made during the past century that the same treatments which were once available only to humans can also be applied to pets as well. X-rays, CAT-scans,

Absolute Magnitude

surgery, prescription medicine, radiation treatment, chemotherapy—everything you might consider using to treat a person with cancer, you can also use for a friend with four legs and a tail. Not long ago, Linda and I would have had to wait for Jake to die within the next four to six weeks; not much longer ago than that, someone might have suggested that I load a deer rifle and take him for a walk in the woods.

But this was the last year of the 20th century, and now we had other options. With treatment, Jake might live a while longer. Perhaps six months, maybe even as long as a year. And Jake was a strong dog; there was a remote possibility that the cancer might go into remission.

There was never any question about what we'd do. I had just sold my new novel and we were planning to use the advance to buy the wooded acre behind our house as an investment, but the health of our friend came first. So we opted for a ten-week program of radiation treatment, beginning with surgery to remove the tumor. Jake was brought out for a quick visit, and Linda tried not to cry as she clung to him. We had brought some of his favorite toys—a plastic squeaky lion, a stuffed raccoon, a tennis ball—and we put a fresh bandanna around his neck. Jake wanted to go home, but he intuitively understood that he had to stay awhile longer. Once again, he trotted back to his pen without any whining or foot-dragging.

When we picked him up at the end of the week, Jake looked awful. His fur had been shaved from the top of his head, leaving a sutured scar which ran from the top of his skull down to the tip of his nose; we would have to keep a plastic cone around his neck at all times to keep him from scratching at his stitches. And he was still sneezing blood, although less often than before, and was nauseous from the all the antibiotics he had been given. I would soon become used to cleaning up blood and vomit.

This was only the beginning. For the next nine weeks, either Linda or I, or both of us together, would make the long

drive halfway across the state to take Jake back to Tufts for another round of radiation treatment, then come back three or four days later to pick him up again and take him home for the weekend. Autumn came to an end, and the cold New England winter was beginning to set in; we made the journey in the chill hours just after dawn and in the freezing rain after sundown. I listened to the Senate impeachment hearings against President Clinton on the radio while battling sleet and traffic on the Massachusetts Turnpike. Jake's head cradled in my lap; when Linda drove him back to Tufts she put Grateful Dead CDs on the deck because that was what he liked to hear.

And yet, through all this, Jake never complained. Not once did he ever whine, or refuse to get out of the car, or snap at the hands of the interns who came out to take him back for another long radiation session. The Tufts staff gave him a nickname—Jake the Snake, because of the sneaky tricks he loved to pull on them—and often commented on how cooperative he was. Zack and Laclede didn't want to be near him at first—they didn't like the hospital smell on him, and his scar looked horrendous—but they soon reaccepted him, and Zack took to curling up with him at night. When Christmas came around, we made sure that he got all the best toys.

The radiation treatment took hold. The nosebleeds stopped; he had to continue taking five or six pills each day, along with eyedrops to soothe an infection in his right eye, but it seemed as if the cancer had gone into remission. The fur on his face began to grow back, but now it was silver-white, making him appear much older than his eight years. For awhile his visits to Tufts were reduced to once every two or three weeks, and then only for the day; Linda and I would go shopping in Worcester while we waited for the lab work to be done, then we'd pick him up the afternoon. By spring he was ready to play ball in the back yard again; he was moving much slower now, and most of the time Laclede would beat

him to it, but I made sure that I tossed the ball in such a way that Jake would have a better chance of retrieving it.

During the summer of 1999, we actually entertained hope that Jake had beaten the odds, that the cancer had gone into permanent remission. And Jake himself had taken a new attitude toward life. Whenever the garbage truck or the UPS delivery van came by, he was the first dog out the door to greet the drivers. When we took the dogs down to the swimming hole in the clearwater creek that runs near our house, he'd happily wade through the cool mountain water, often ducking his head beneath the surface to retrieve a stick for me to throw for him. And when he walked through Northampton or Amherst, he did so with his head raised, looking at everything that passed by, greeting strangers with a happy smile.

One afternoon in late August, I saw him lying in the grass near the back porch. He was alone, but he was smiling, observing everything with great interest: the crows at the end of the yard, the first leaves falling from the trees, the way the warm breeze lifted the grass. It had been nearly nine months since he had first been diagnosed with cancer; according to what the doctor at Tufts had told us then, he had only a month or two left to live, even under the best of conditions. He couldn't possibly understand this fact . . . and yet, watching him then through the kitchen window, I knew that he knew that his time was short. He had put up a good fight, but the time bomb was still ticking, and he was savoring this precious moment at the end of summer.

A week later, he began to sneeze blood again.

When we brought him back to Tufts, and the new tests showed that the tumor had reappeared. This time, though, he had fewer options. The cancer had destroyed most of the bone separating his right nostril from his left, so surgery was out of the question, and there was no way he could take any

Primary Ignition

more radiation treatment. The doctors—by now he had more than three working on his case—tentatively suggested that they attempt an experimental form of chemotherapy; if they tried the normal procedure, his chances of recovery were less than 15 percent, and he might even die during treatment.

By now Linda and I had resigned ourselves to the fact that Jake was going to die. I just prayed that he would remain with us through the fall; we had two family weddings we needed to attend in September and October, and I didn't want Jake to die in the kennel while we were out of town. And I hoped that, regardless of whether the experiment yielded positive results, the results would aid veterinary research at Tufts; if Jake was doomed, at least his death might help the next dog with the same illness.

So we agreed to the procedure. The last time we took him to Tufts, though, Jake was reluctant to get out of the car. By now he had been here dozens of times, and he was sick of the whole thing. By coincidence, a camera crew from CBS News happened to be at Tufts that morning; they were filming a segment for *48 Hours* dealing with animal intelligence, and they taped Linda and me as we said goodbye to Jake before he was led back into the treatment area. That segment never made it to the final footage which was aired several weeks later, for which I'm actually grateful. All of us tried to be brave, but we knew that we were rolling the dice.

We came up snake-eyes. The chemotherapy wasn't successful. Jake's tumor continued to grow. We still had an option to bring him in for regular chemotherapy, but the odds against his recovery were now almost non-existent, and he was sick of going to the hospital. We decided to let him end his days at home, in the company of his friends and family.

him in the front yard. It was a bright indian summer day; a warm breeze was coming from the southwest, and the sky was blue and cloudless. Linda and I stroked his black fur, and in tearful whispers we told him how much we loved him, and we thanked him for being our friend. Laclede kept running back and forth with a ball in his mouth, wanting Jake to play catch with him again, but Zack seemed to understand what was going on; he lay between us, snuggling with his oldest friend one last time. And I think Jake understood as well; he was in great pain now, and could barely see us. All he wanted was relief.

Robin found us in just the same way in her examination room. She didn't need an explanation; she knew that the time had come. She went away, and came back a little while later with a syringe filled with an oily brown fluid. Linda didn't want to watch—she had been through this before, with two other dogs from her childhood—so she left the room, and I held Jake in my lap as Robin squatted down next to him and gave him the lethal injection.

In the final second of his life, as the drug entered his veins, Jake suddenly sat up. There was more pressure against his skull, no more agony; all at once, he was free of pain. He rose up on his forelegs, blindly turned toward to me... and then he smiled, and tried to lick my face. In his moment of ascension, he wanted to thank me.

And then he collapsed. We caught him as he fell, and gently lowered him to the floor.

I sat with him for a long time, still stroking his fur long after his heart had ceased beating, still speaking softly to him, trying to make his passage as comfortable as possible. Robin quietly left the room; Linda came back in and knelt beside me, and that was when I broke down.

I've never wept so hard in my life. That was the toughest thing I've ever had to do.

So now it's four months later. Writing about this now, I'm still wiping away the tears. But life has gone on.

Jake is still with us. The polished ceramic urn containing his ashes rests on our mantle, next to a framed photo of him, his collar, his favorite bandanna, and a tennis ball. A shrine to a fallen comrade. Linda regularly dusts the urn, and from time to time I stop by for a visit.

Two months went by, and finally the silence became a little too loud, the mourning a bit too prolonged. Zack was deeply depressed, and Laclede was wandering around the house looking for someone to play with; the Stud no longer dropped by, but Winston and Wally were still in our back yard every morning. I was reluctant to adopt another dog, but I was over-ruled by a majority vote; a couple of weeks before Christmas, we began visiting animal shelters again. On our second visit to the same shelter in New Hampshire where we had found Zack over thirteen years ago, we met a litter of shepherd-lab mix puppies who had been dropped off only a couple of weeks earlier. Once again, it was Linda's choice; the puppy she selected licked her face, tugged at the cuffs of her jeans, and urinated on her shoes. A bond they formed was instant and unmistakable, and a few days later we brought him home.

After we signed his adoption papers, the staff at the shelter informed us of his birthday. As coincidence would have it, he was born on October 14, 1999, the very same day Jake died. He has a peculiar white mark on his brown muzzle, sort of like a comet's tail.

We've named him Star. And, yes, he's learning how to play ball.



On Jake's last morning, before we took him to the vet's office for the last time, we sat down with



D.E.H. '00

Virtual Daughter

Linda J. Dunn

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Dennis stepped out of the hotel elevator and into the ghost-filled lobby. The stench of burning bacon from the breakfast buffet meant his favorite Japanese hotel had adopted the unfortunate custom of serving an American breakfast to their guests. Would anyone else eat there this morning or was everybody virtual?

A ghost in a cheap, black VR suit of American manufacture stepped backwards, standing half-in and half-out of Dennis. Dennis instinctively stepped back, pulling his arm out of the ghost's back and cleared his throat loudly.

The ghost turned around, mouthed something silently then pressed his headpiece. "Sorry. I was having a fairly intense conversation with Jerry and didn't see you. You're real, aren't you?"

Dennis nodded.

"Don't see much of that any more at these conferences but you didn't have to travel far since you're native Japanese."

Dennis bit back a sharp retort. "Actually, I'm American."

"Sorry. You look Japanese. Here for the conference?"

"We orientals all look alike, right? Even when we're half-Vietnamese?"

"No. I'm meeting a few business clients who are attending the conference before I go on to Hong Kong to take care of another account."

"What's the weather like here?"

Dennis shrugged. "A little warmer than usual for Tokyo in July, but the hotel has decided to compensate by operating their air conditioning at a temperature normally reserved for meat lockers."

"Glad this cheap suit doesn't have sensors, then. Sorry I bumped into you. It's not polite to stand inside people."

He turned away and Dennis stared at the restaurant again. Did he really want to eat an American breakfast in Japan? Maybe he should wander outside and see if there were any street vendors nearby.

"Dennis! Dennis Nguyen!"

Dennis turned, half-expecting to see another dark suited ghost. Instead, he stared into the deep blue eyes of a woman he hadn't seen in over ten years.

"Carol McIntire?"

Her smile faded for a brief instant. "Mekkelson now."

"Marriage?"

"Divorce."

"I'm sorry."

She shrugged. "These things happen. It's been a few years. I'm over it now. Care to join me for breakfast?"

"Is it edible?"

"Almost. They hired a chef from America. I think he specialized in flipping burgers at his old job."

Dennis laughed and followed Carol towards the buffet.

"I'm glad to see you. I was beginning to think the entire hotel was filled with nothing but ghosts."

"When the clients are real, I'm real."

"My thoughts exactly," Dennis said as he lifted the lid on a particularly unappetizing selection and decided the rolls looked much more inviting than they did a few moments ago.

"I notice the ghosts charge a lot less than we charge and I doubt overhead is much lower when they're virtual," Carol said, motioning to the chef for an omelet. "Those suits aren't cheap."

"I know. My own suit took three months income but I refused to buy anything that didn't have five-sense capability and full-range recording."

"That much? But why? You just said—"

"My work life is real. My home life is virtual."

"If I was your wife, I don't think I'd be satisfied with—"

"No wife. Just a daughter."

"Divorced?"

He shook his head. "Never married. You remember Jenny." Carol shivered and Dennis knew it wasn't a reaction to the air conditioning in the hotel. Her voice turned brittle.

"Yes. I remember her very well. What's she doing now? CEO of some Fortune 500 company?"

He followed Carol to a table in the nearly vacant restaurant and sat down.

"No. She's a full-time mom to my daughter, Amanda. Our daughter, I should say. Seven years old, beautiful, and smart. I don't know how I got so lucky."

Carol's fork paused mid-way to her mouth and egg slid off her fork.

"You and Jenny?"

He shrugged. "I know. We weren't exactly a good match. I guess I knew from the beginning that it wouldn't last but she could be so persuasive when she wanted something."

"Don't I know it! So did you get screwed?"

He stared at her a moment before realizing that she meant financially.

"I guess. I got hit for five years of back support for the years I didn't know I had a daughter, but once I finally met Amanda, money seemed such a trivial thing to argue about. Besides, Amanda deserves every penny I can spare."

"Wait a minute. Whoa, partner. Did you say you didn't know you had a daughter back there?"

Dennis nodded. "We didn't exactly part under the best of terms."

"Let me guess. Jenny left you and then blamed you for abandoning her."

Dennis smiled and spread jelly on his roll. "You did know Jenny."

"Far too well. I still have the scar on my back where she

Absolute Magnitude

clawed her way past me up the corporate ladder."

"You're speaking figuratively, I hope."

"Mostly. I do have a small scar from where she spilled hot coffee on me and then snatched the client from under my nose while I was changing clothes." Carol shook her head. "You and Jenny? And a daughter? Now that's something I would never have expected in a thousand years."

"I admit we weren't suited but it was hardly that bizarre a pairing."

Carol shook her head again. "No. I mean the daughter. Jenny was always so careful and so determined not to let anything or anyone get in her way. I find it difficult to believe she had an accident and then didn't have an abortion."

"We were drunk."

"Still—"

"And her luggage was in Paris while we were in San Francisco. As for not aborting Amanda—well, I can only say I'm glad she didn't. Maybe it had something to do with changing her lifestyle."

"So Jenny decided she preferred being a full-time mom to corporate life? I wouldn't have expected that, either."

Dennis hesitated a moment. He stared intently at the bacon floating in grease on his plate.

"Give," Carol said.

"What?"

"The food's not that interesting. What happened between you two that she hated you so much she didn't even tell you about your daughter? And why would Ms. Corporate America suddenly decide to become a full-time mom?"

Dennis hesitated a moment. "I fired her."

"You mean the company fired her?"

Dennis shook his head. "No. It was about six months before I decided to strike out on my own. I wasn't even in Jenny's department but I was the one who caught her siphoning funds. She'd developed some problems she couldn't control. She's okay now but for a while she would do anything for a fix."

"Booze? Drugs?"

"Headbands."

"What?"

"Those feel-good bands."

"Wiring? But those things are cheap."

"Not the illegal ones."

"Oh." It was Carol's turn to stare at the remains of her omelet, feigning interest in the parsley.

"I use the suit to visit my daughter. It's the only way we can have any time together."

Carol stared up at him. "Excuse me, Dennis. I didn't think it was possible to tell me anything that shocks me more than what you've already said but are you saying that you never see her in real time?"

Dennis couldn't meet Carol's eyes. He picked up the roll and took a large bite, forcing

himself to nod.

"Why?"

"What?"

"Why, Dennis? Why haven't you paid a personal visit?"

"Jenny didn't want me to see Amanda at all. That's why she kept my daughter's existence a secret for so long. If the Welfare Department hadn't contacted me, I still wouldn't know about her."

"Listen to me, Dennis. We lost touch long ago but I still consider you a friend. You have rights. If you need an attorney—"

Dennis shook his head. "No. I've got a very good attorney but once Jenny suggested virtual visits, it seemed like a good idea. After all, I travel so much and this allows me to see Amanda almost daily. I help her with her homework and sometimes we hook our links together and go sightseeing."

Carol took a deep breath and pointed towards the lobby where several ghosts in dark business suits waited for their clients.

"If it's not good enough for your clients, how can it be good enough for your child?"

A slow trickle of pain grew into a tidal wave that flooded his body and threatened to drown him.

Carol touched his arm gently again. "I'm sorry. I know that hurt but I can't let something like this go by without telling you how I feel."

Dennis swallowed hard, choking for a moment on a huge dosage of painful truth. Carol was right. He needed to visit Amanda in person. How many times had he promised himself to do that and found some excuse to avoid it at the last minute?

Dennis let his breath out in a rush. "You're right. I guess I've been afraid of confronting Jenny."

Carol smiled. "Any intelligent person would be afraid of confronting Jenny, but she's your daughter's mother, and the two of you need to put Amanda first. Now let's finish this meal and get out there before the clients decide there's no one here but ghosts."

Carol started to stand up but Dennis reached into his pocket and pulled out a flat picture he'd taken of Amanda last night.

"May I show you Amanda's picture?"

She smiled and sat down again, unfolding the photo. Her smile faded and her eyes filled with questions as she studied the photo of a little girl with pure black hair and features more oriental than his own half-Vietnamese appearance.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to stare. It's just that—Well, I guess I expected to see a little girl with Jenny's frizzy blonde hair and blue eyes and instead, she looks just like you."

Dennis tried to smile when she handed him



Virtual Daughter

back the picture and stood up to leave but her words echoed through his mind.

Amanda didn't look anything like him. If it weren't for the DNA test results, he'd wonder if she was really his own child.

Dennis pulled off his jacket and unbuttoned the top button on his shirt, wishing he'd remembered how hot it was in Indianapolis in August.

His suitcases were too heavy. Dennis should have left the VR suit at home but part of him was worried that when he showed up, unannounced, at Amanda's house, Jenny would refuse to let him see Amanda. If that happened, he could still see her tonight virtually.

He slid behind the wheel of the rental car and coughed, choking on the stench of cigarette smoke behind the air freshener.

He turned on the air conditioner and set the car's auto-navigation feature to guide him to Jenny's address.

He turned onto the Airport Expressway and then right on I-70, exiting at Prospect Avenue and weaving down some one-way streets until he reached the kind of neighborhood where his instinctive reaction was to lock the car doors.

Junk cars on concrete blocks seemed the preferred style of landscaping. Gutters overflowed with grass and dandelions and the houses all seemed to have missing siding, broken windows, and roofs that he suspected didn't quite keep out the rain.

Dennis pulled in front of the address listed for Jenny and stared at the shabby little house. The screen door was a broken frame, hanging at an angle from one rusty hinge. The windows were all open and not one of them had a screen. He could hear the heavy thud of music playing inside the house and he knew it wasn't the Brahms Lullabye.

In front of him, parked squarely in front of the house, was a new Jaguar.

This couldn't be right.

He re-checked the database. No doubt about it. Computers didn't make these kinds of mistakes. Not anymore.

Dennis glanced at his watch. It was nine o'clock in the morning and it looked like Jenny had company. Rather wealthy company too, judging by the appearance of the car. Maybe he should drive by the school first and talk to Amanda's teachers. The e-mail and transcripts he'd received were always full of glowing reports and he'd love a chance to hear what they had to say in person.

It also gave him a good excuse to postpone the meeting with Jenny just a little longer.

The school was just three blocks away and it looked nothing like he'd imagined.

A tall, chain-link fence surrounded a sprawling brick building that had bars on all the windows.

Human playground monitors watched the children. No surveillance cameras could be seen anywhere.

What kind of school didn't record everything on the property and have guards to protect the kids?

Dennis watched the children playing on shabby playground equipment where the only speck of green was an occasional dandelion poking its head through concrete.

Despite the heat, a cold chill ran through his body. Amanda couldn't be at this school. It wasn't good enough for her.

He saw her. She was standing in a corner with a group of other kids, watching some little Eurasian girl with frizzy, sandy-colored hair sitting on top of a boy much bigger than any of the other children inside the fence. The girl pounded the boy's head against the concrete again and again, screaming, "Take it back!"

Adults ran forward and pulled the little girl off the boy and hustled them both inside the building. Dennis never took his eyes off Amanda, watching her turn back to her friends and then follow the adults inside the building.

He tried to get her attention and waved but she never looked in his direction.

I should have come earlier. Something must be very wrong for Amanda to be living in this kind of neighborhood and attending this school.

Dennis walked to the front of the school and pressed the button on the main gate.

"May I help you?" a female voice asked.

"I guess I should have called first but my name is Dennis Nguyen and I wanted to meet the teachers and principal at my daughter's school. I travel constantly on business and—"

"What was your name again?"

"Nguyen. N-g-u-y-e-n."

Silence followed and then, "I'm sorry but I don't show a student with that last name."

"She has her mother's last name. Ryman. Amanda Ryman."

Another long silence followed and then, "Come in. Please turn right inside the door and come directly to the main office."

The door creaked when he opened it. No automated door. This one required a strong pull. There was no scanner inside. Nothing to do an automatic check for weapons. How did they know he didn't have a gun in his briefcase? The school looked poor but surely they could afford the basics.

The building smelled musty, like bread rotting too long in a wet bag. He looked around, noting the peeling paint and graffiti and crayoned pictures that were doing a poor job of disguising the run down appearance of the school.

The building was hot. What kind of school didn't have air conditioning with year round schooling?

The same kind that doesn't scan its visitors for weapons.

Dennis turned right and stepped into an office filled with antique computer equipment and a middle-aged woman whose smile didn't reach her eyes.

"Dennis Nguyen?"

He nodded.

"Amanda Ryman's father?"

He nodded again.

"You have good timing. Your daughter is in the counselor's

Absolute Magnitude

office. We weren't able to reach your wife."

"I'm not married. Her mother has custody."

"Oh? Sorry. Amanda's records have always been spotty. We've tried several times to get additional information but your ex-wife never responds and—well, you know what Amanda is like."

Dennis gripped his briefcase tightly. What did she mean by that comment? Amanda was perfect. Maybe Jenny had a few things to explain about the house and the school but he saw Amanda every day and read the school reports.

An overweight black man in a too-tight jacket and stained slacks stepped into the office. "Mr. Ryman? I'm Erm Harris, the school's principal. I'm glad to see you stopped by this morning."

"Nguyen," Dennis said. "Amanda's mother and I were never married."

"Oh, yes. Well, that's normal for this neighborhood. Can you step into my office for a few minutes please? I'd like to talk to you before you see the counselor and Amanda."

Closet would have been a more appropriate term for the room they entered. Erm leaned against the front of the desk and Dennis wondered how he usually got behind it. Climbed over the top? There wasn't enough room on either side that he could see for someone Erm's size—or even much thinner—to squeeze behind the desk.

"We've tried to work with Amanda since kindergarten, but we're not a wealthy school, and I really think her psychological problems are beyond our ability—"

"What psychological problems? The reports I get from the school are always full of positive words."

Erm's eyes widened. "Reports? What reports?"

"The ones you e-mail me."

Erm looked at his desk. Dennis turned to stare at the manual typewriter that occupied the stand squeezed between the wall and one side of Erm's desk.

"We don't have e-mail capability here. I know all the schools are supposed to be network-capable, but we've had problems with theft and vandalism, and the district gave up replacing equipment. They've decided, instead, to close us next year and transfer our students."

"Sounds like a good idea to me."

Erm stood up straight, filling the tiny room with his size. "We do the best we can with what we've got. Our situation isn't help by dealing with students like your daughter. I'm going to recommend placement in an alternative school."

"What? Why?"

"She's uncontrollable. Didn't you hear what happened on the playground just a few minutes ago? We had to call an ambulance for Jason Williams."

Blood wasn't flowing through his veins

anymore. It was ice.

The room, the heat, the stretch—everything faded away and Dennis prayed for the floor to open up and swallow him.

Dennis reached into his jacket and pulled out a flat picture of Amanda. He laid it on the desk gently, half afraid it would turn to dust along with all his hopes and dreams.

"This is my daughter, Amanda. Are we talking about the same Amanda Ryman?"

Erm stared at the picture and looked up. "What kind of scam is this? That's Heather Choi."

Dennis's knees buckled under him and he stumbled, catching himself against the desk. He forced himself to stand upright and open the briefcase. Inside was his laptop with all the records of Amanda.

He turned on the laptop and watched Erm closely as he stepped through all the major events of the last two years. The welfare notice of compensation owed. The paternity tests. The court order. The visitation agreement. The glowing reports from the school.

Erm leaned against the wall, staring at the display.

"I've seen some strange things around here but never anything like this. Did your ex-wife work in the computer industry or something before your divorce?"

Dennis felt tears flowing down his cheeks. "No," he finally managed to choke out. "Well, we all know how to use them in our work and Jenny had a computer science minor but—what are you suggesting?"

"I think you need to see your attorney and then probably the police. I can't for the life of me comprehend why anyone would go through all that trouble to keep a man from meeting his own daughter—although I'm beginning to get an idea where some of Amanda's problems originated."

"I suppose Amanda's not on the gymnastics team."

Erm laughed then shook his head. "I'm sorry. The idea of our school having something like that. No. I think maybe Heather's grandmother—but I shouldn't talk about other students. I don't know what's going on around here and I don't want to put the school at risk by giving you information about a child you obviously thought

was your own. I am, however, prepared to tell you everything you want to know about the real Amanda. I warn you it's not pretty."

Dennis nodded. "I think I know. Does she have curly, sandy-colored hair?"

Erm nodded.

Dennis slid against the desk and pushed some papers aside to sit down on it. "I think I saw what happened. That kid was much bigger than her."

"That doesn't change the fact that she would have gladly killed him if we hadn't stopped her. We have zero tolerance for violence."

"But if he started it—"

"Then she should have summoned a



Virtual Daughter

playground monitor, not taken matters into her own hands."

"But you don't know—"

"Neither do you. Why are you defending a daughter you don't even know?"

"I don't know. I'm confused. I guess I keep thinking of the Amanda I know. She was so happy and smart."

Dennis looked at Erm and he shook his head.

"She may have the ability but we've not seen any signs of it. Amanda refused to complete the tests for learning disabilities."

"That's what started the fight, isn't it?"

Erm nodded. "The boy said her mom fried Amanda's brain as well as her own."

Dennis fell off the desk and landed against the wall.

"Are you all right?" Erm asked.

Dennis started to nod and then shook his head. "I don't think I'll ever be all right again. Jenny's still wired? After I spent all that money on clinics?"

"Wired or something. I'm afraid your money has gone for other things. Tell me, have you thought of trying for custody? Everyone here would be more than happy to testify for you."

"You don't know anything about me."

"I know you're not her mother and anything would be better than what she's already got."

* Dennis leaned his head against his knee, fighting for breath and trying to push away his feelings so he could think logically about all this.

"Can you give Amanda a little time? Just long enough for me to make other arrangements for her education and talk to Jenny?"

"She attacked someone. That's an automatic suspension."

"I can get a temporary injunction to keep her in school and drag it out as long as a week."

Erm sighed. "I've been threatened many times by parents but this is the first time I've been threatened with an injunction. Two days. No longer."

"Thanks. Can you give me the address for Heather's parents?"

Erm shook his head. "No."

"Not even a hint? Remember. I've spent two years believing she's my daughter. I think I'm entitled to an explanation."

"You'll have to find those answers without my help."

"Then can you at least tell me something about the two girls? Something generic?"

Erm took a deep breath.

"This conversation never happened. Heather lives with her grandmother. She's bright. A good student. I think she is on a gymnastics team although how her grandmother can afford that on just social security is something I don't understand. Heather's mother died four years ago from a drug overdose and she has no father of record. Anything else you want to know, you'll need to learn from a private detective."

"Amanda?"

"Unhappy. Sleeps in class. Steals. Lies. Cheats on tests.

Very uncoordinated except when she's fighting. I've never seen a kid that could fight like that before and coming from this neighborhood, that's something. The kid invites trouble. She doesn't go looking for it but she hangs out a sign that says, 'Looking for trouble? Apply here.'"

"How's she get along with the other kids—when she's not fighting?"

"She doesn't. The teachers aren't fond of her either. She alienated her everyone in the Head Start program and both kindergarten teachers. She's disruptive and the biggest complaint is that she doesn't even try to learn."

Dennis closed his eyes but when he opened them, he was still inside the tiny office with Erm. This was not his worst nightmare. This was far worse than anything he could ever imagine and deep inside, he could hear Carol's voice telling him that if he'd just visited earlier, he could have forestalled all this.

Well, it wasn't too late. She was still young enough that he could still turn her life around.

"Would you like to talk to our school counselor?" Erm asked.

Dennis hesitated. "Later, yes. Right now, I want to get to the nearest phone and call my attorney. After that, I'm going to find Heather's grandmother."

He stopped by the fence on his way to the car. Through the window, he could just barely see his daughter. Heather. No matter what he'd heard inside, he still thought of Heather as his daughter. Not Amanda.

Amanda was a nightmare. Heather was the girl who showed him how she could summersault and asked endless questions about elephant tusks at the British museum when they took a virtual tour. Heather was the one who asked questions about math and giggled madly when he recited the poem of the Jabberwocky for the umpteenth time.

Amanda might be his biological child. Maybe. Where was the switch? Did Jenny deceive him completely, faking the DNA tests? Did he really even have a daughter at all?

It was going to be a long phone conversation with his attorney and then he needed a good private detective who could work quickly.

Dennis waited for the kids to walk past. He didn't like sitting outside, watching his daughter go off to school alone without speaking to her, but he still wasn't sure what he wanted. His attorney, however, was quite clear about what he should do.

Nothing.

Wait.

Fly out on another business trip. Make more money and wait for his bill and advice.

No.

Dennis got out of the car and walked the few steps to the front door.

The screen on this house was rusty but it hung on two hinges.

Absolute Magnitude

He knocked on the door and an elderly oriental woman answered.

She looked at him and tears ran down her cheeks. The woman bowed slightly and held the door open for him to step inside.

"Come in. I've been expecting you for two years."

Dennis stepped into the small living room and looked around.

A computer desk with an old, but still serviceable, computer blocked his entrance. He stepped slightly to the left and nearly fell onto the sofa. Too much furniture was crammed into a room far too small for it.

"Please, sit down," she said.

Dennis sat on the sofa and looked to his right, into the adjoining dining room. A small table held the remains of a simple breakfast and books laid open in front of the plates. On the wall beside the table and wrapping around to the window were bookcases filled and overflowing with books.

Down the hallway, he could see four doors. His guess was one bathroom and three small bedrooms. Unless he was mistaken, one of them was probably filled with VR equipment.

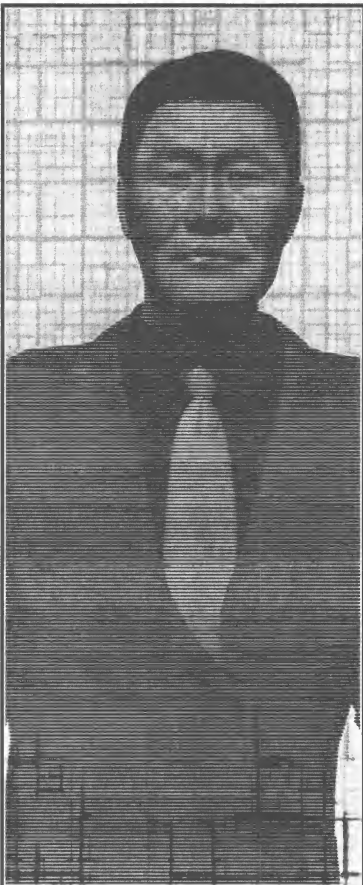
"I am Ling Choi," the woman said, "and you want to know how my granddaughter became your child?"

Dennis nodded.

The old woman sat down in the computer chair, her back straight and stiff, and folded her hands in her lap.

"Jenny Ryman is a fool and I told her so."

Tears ran down Ling's



face and she paused to wipe them away. "She offered so much in return for something that Heather needed."

"A father?"

Ling nodded. She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed at her eyes. "I am old and have no money. Heather needs so much and here was your wife, offering a father and money to pay for gymnastics lessons and everything else that I wanted to give Heather but could not afford."

"Why?"

Ling shrugged. "Jenny is a fool."

"A wired fool?"

Ling stared at him. Their eyes met. "You know about her problems?"

"I'm only beginning to learn."

"She is a very sick woman. Her boyfriend is no good and Amanda is the way she is because Jenny can only hurt, not love."

"How did you do it?"

Ling stared down at her hands. "It was easy. You never questioned anything."

Dennis cringed at those words. It was all his fault. All of it.

"Jenny had a friend who installed something on the VR suit so every time you said, 'Amanda', Heather heard her own name. You never questioned anything or even asked her how she lived. The first week, I was sure this wouldn't last a month. Instead, my Heather has had a father for two years."

"Jenny told me never to ask Amanda anything about their relationship. She gave me some psychological

Virtual Daughter

babble." Dennis hesitated a moment. No. He couldn't shift the blame. It was his fault. If he'd only visited in real time occasionally or asked Amanda a few leading questions, he would have stumbled across the lie. If he'd even just checked Jenny's address, he would have discovered how Amanda was living.

Dennis moaned softly. How could he have been so foolish and trusting? "I should have checked."

"Jenny said you never would. She said your business was more important to you than anything else in the world."

Dennis looked up into Ling's eyes. "Nothing in the world was more important to me than my daughter after I met Amanda."

"Heather," Ling said. "You met my Heather. She is everything a father could want in a daughter. Why reject her just because she is not biologically your own? You love each other. Please don't hurt her by abandoning her now that you know."

Dennis stood up, his head throbbing. "No. I can't visit her now."

"But why?"

"Because I do know. I care about Amanda. I mean, Heather. I don't want her hurt. But I'm also upset and angry that I lost two years with my daughter while building a relationship with Heather at the expense of Amanda. I can't forget or forgive that now and I don't know if I'll ever be able to put it aside."

"Heather is all the things Amanda can never be."

"Amanda would be different if I had been there two years ago instead of spending almost every evening with Heather."

Ling stood up, her mouth set in a straight line and her eyes hard and unyielding.

"I care nothing for what you think of me or your wife but what do I tell Heather when you are not here tonight as you were not here last night?"

Dennis hesitated a moment. Telling Heather the truth now could destroy her.

"I don't know. You created this problem. You solve it. I just know that I cannot possibly visit her now because if Heather sees me and we talk, she will know something is wrong."

Ling's eyes softened and filled with tears again. "You are right. It was wrong for me to ask what you cannot give. I will tell her you are ill."

"And it will be the truth. I don't think I've ever felt sicker in my life."

She stood up and bowed. "Thank you for coming here to tell me this. Please consider my offer. I am old and Heather is young. We have no other family alive in this country. She would be your daughter forever and you know she will become everything you ever wanted in a child."

Dennis hesitated. It was tempting, so tempting, to accept this substitute daughter and walk away from the child who was his own. He loved Heather and felt nothing for Amanda but the nagging guilt in the back of his mind that he had an

obligation he'd failed to fulfill.

"It would be a lie," Dennis said. "Business relationships built upon lies always fail and I suspect that a family secret this large would somehow become known even though there are no other family members to betray me. The school knows. Surely others must know as well."

Dennis turned and walked out the door. He got into the rental car and checked the system for messages. Nothing from the attorney. Not yet.

He drove to Jenny's house and parked the car behind the Jaguar. From the front door, he could hear the dull thud of too-loud music.

Her boyfriend answered the door.

"Yeah."

"I'm Dennis Nguyen, Amanda's father."

Jenny moved into view and he gasped for breath, shocked by the sight of her skeleton-thin body.

"Jenny? What happened?"

Half the hair was shaved off and wires protruded from what Dennis knew was an illegal connection.

"What did you do to her?"

"None of your damn business."

"Yes, it is. My daughter lives here, and I send a lot of money for her support. I don't see any evidence of it reaching Amanda."

"It doesn't have to reach Amanda. It's Jenny's money and she can do whatever she wants with it. Right now, she's using it to make my car payments."

Dennis balled his hands into tight fists.

"That money's for Amanda."

He shrugged. "Amanda enjoys the car. I let her ride in it. Sometimes."

A cruel smile spread across his lips. "Relax. We take good care of the kid. She's got a place to sleep and I haven't even had her turning tricks yet—"

Dennis lost it. Instinctively, his hands reached out and locked around the guy's throat.

Jenny screamed. A moment later he was rolling on the ground, fighting off both Jenny and her boyfriend. Before he had a chance to react, Jenny's boyfriend stood back and Dennis stared up into the barrel of a gun.

A loud click echoed through his mind. The safety was off. No time to think. His body reacted for him and rolled across the yard.

An explosion rocked the ground nearby and an insect bit him. He slapped his hand at the insect and his fingers closed on sticky blood.

I'm shot. I'm going to die.

Jenny screamed again and Dennis staggered to his feet. The bullet wound didn't hurt. Maybe it was just a nick.

But if I don't get the hell out of here, I'm dead.

Dennis staggered to the car, fumbling in his right pocket for the keys. He pressed the button and the door unlocked. He opened the door, dived inside, and locked the doors.

Dennis reached for the ignition, his fingers shaking and ice

Absolute Magnitude

cold water rushing through his veins.

Funny. It doesn't hurt. I wonder if I'll see my life in slow motion now.

The keys fell through his fingers. Dennis leaned down to pick them up and the window beside him exploded, throwing glass everywhere.

The ocean roared in his ears and he fumbled with the keys again, somehow jamming the right one into the ignition and starting the motor while still keeping his body below the level of the window.

Something was after him. A monster with claws reached through the window and grabbed at him. He pushed the car into forward and pressed on the accelerator.

The car lurched and crashed into something.

A cat. A jaguar. Someone was screaming about a wounded jaguar. He could barely hear them over the roar of the ocean inside his head.

What was he doing at the beach? The tide. It was coming in. He had to get out of here.

He threw the car into reverse, hearing the monster still shrieking beside him. A thud echoed from the car roof but he couldn't sit up straight. Didn't dare move from his position on the floor.

If he did, the monster would reach him with his claws.

He pushed the stick forward, and pressed his foot down slightly. Why was the beach house moving? Earthquake?

Dennis glanced up at the little mirror hanging from the ceiling in the beach house.

Someone was standing in the street, pointing at him.

The back window of the beachhouse exploded, throwing glass everywhere.

His foot pressed tight against the floor and the beachhouse flew forward.

It was a tornado. The beachhouse was flying through the sky and would land on a wicked witch.

He knew the wicked witch. She was skeleton thin and her head was half-shaved. His daughter lived with the witch.

Amanda!

He sat upright then, seeing through the haze of pain. He had to save Amanda from the wicked witch.

He pushed his foot harder against the floor, watching cars fly past.

Horns sounded everywhere around him. The fog must be rolling into the beach. That's why the foghorns were sounding. That's why he could barely see.

A siren sounded somewhere nearby. Tornado. Did they have tornados at the beach? No. He flew to the beach on a tornado.

Stop!

Something reached out from his mind and told him to take his foot off the floor. He did and the cars around him slowed down. Three cars with lights surrounded him.

Was it Christmas already?

Soldiers walked towards him, guns drawn. He giggled and then burst into loud laughter.

Hands reached inside and opened the door. He fell out and the soldiers caught him, holding him to the ground.

Two men in white ran towards him, carrying a VR suit and screaming that they had to get him into the suit fast.

Over the roar of the ocean and the shriek of the air raid sirens, he could hear someone saying, "You have the right to remain silent."

Dennis stared at the papers on the hospital tray in front of him then turned to his attorney.

"Amanda's your daughter," the attorney said. "I managed to confirm that much and I've initiated all the proper paperwork for a custody fight. I've also taken the liberty of posting your bail and handling a few other legal issues that I suspected you'd want me to handle if you'd been capable of thinking straight. You can sign them or we can go through them together while I explain everything to you."

"At your hourly rates? No thanks, Jack. Just tell me how much trouble I'm in."

"Your ex-girlfriend claims you assaulted her boyfriend and he fired in self-defense. They've filed charges of assault against you. I countered with attempted murder."

Dennis hesitated a moment. "I lost my temper when he said he didn't have Amanda turning tricks yet."

"What did you do?"

Dennis glanced around the room.

"We're alone. The room's not bugged."

"I tried to strangle him and the next thing I knew they were both on top of me and then he started shooting."

"Understandable but stupid. Didn't I tell you not to go anywhere near them?"

"Yes."

"You bothered the other girl's grandmother, too."

"How did you know about that?"

"The private detective's reports."

"You had a detective watching me?"

"Don't you ever check the bills I send you?"

"I haven't gotten this one yet."

"You will. It's not small and this incident just tripled it. I came here in person."

"How was your flight?"

"Turbulent."

"Sorry."

"Not half as sorry as you're going to be if you don't listen to me. I'm flying home tonight. I don't want to come back. Go home. Let me handle all this."

"Amanda's living in that house with a junkie mom and a pimp who tried to kill me."

"Any good lawyer could get the charges dropped. Fortunately, they don't know that. I may be able to negotiate something with them but not if you're still here, stirring up trouble."

"Damn it, Jack. You wouldn't walk away if it was your daughter."

Jack picked up the papers and put them in his briefcase. "If

Virtual Daughter

it was my daughter, he wouldn't have had a chance to shoot at me."

"Then how can you tell me to do nothing?"

"I'm your attorney, Dennis. I have to give you good advice. I wouldn't necessarily follow it if it was my kid."

He winked at Dennis on the way out. "But you do. Book a flight home. Let the hired help handle this."

The door closed quietly behind him and Dennis looked around for something to throw at the door. A plastic bedpan, fortunately empty.

He picked it up with the uninjured right arm and hurled it against the door at just the moment the nurse opened it.

She caught the bedpan with her face then turned to glare at him. Dennis fell back against his pillow and moaned softly.

I can't do anything right.

Dennis waited in the cab beside Amanda's school. His flight left in two hours but he couldn't leave without at least seeing her and knowing she was all right.

The only thing he wasn't sure about was which "she" he was worried about. Heather-Amanda or his biological daughter, Amanda?

The doors opened and kids ran past. Heather and a group of girls walked past him and his heart raced. She looked okay but what did that mean? Did she believe Ling's story that her father was too ill to visit or even call? Did she cry herself to sleep last night, wondering why her father apparently abandoned her?

"Let go!" a voice shouted from the front of the school.

Amanda was surrounded by three boys. One of them was a good foot taller than her and Dennis recognized him as the boy she'd beaten in the school yard.

Dennis dived out of the car, forgetting about the injured arm, but he wasn't fast enough.

Before he could reach her, Amanda had one boy pinned to the ground and another kid was lying nearby, nursing a bloody nose.

The third boy was moving in, though. Dennis reached out and grabbed his arm. "Don't even think about it"

The kid turned around and glared up at Dennis, his sneer turning into a smile when he saw Dennis's injured arm.

Ern ran forward, moving faster than Dennis thought possible for someone that obese.

"What are you going to do about it?" the boy asked Dennis.

"He's doing nothing," Ern said. "I'm in charge. Boy, you move your butt into my office now or I'll sit on you so hard you'll look like a pancake. Now!"

Two more adults moved forward and the boy followed one of them inside the school.

Ern turned to Dennis. "I thought you promised me she'd be out in two days."

Dennis held out his arm as much as he could without pain shooting through his body. "Sorry. Minor complications."

"She's expelled. Now. Nothing your attorney says is going to change that."

Amanda walked up beside him and stared. "Who are you?" she asked.

Her eyes were full of admiration and Dennis felt his heart racing. He opened his mouth to speak but a teacher standing nearby said, "Your father."

Amanda's eyes flashed pure hatred and she flew at him, pinning him to the ground and tightening her hands around his throat in a death grip.

Ern and a teacher pulled Amanda off Dennis and held her. "Stay away from us!" Amanda screamed. "Leave my mom alone."

Dennis struggled to get to his feet, the pain inside greater than the throbbing of his injured arm. "You don't understand. I'm trying to help."

"We don't need your frigging help." Amanda jerked her arms and broke free from the teachers. She turned and ran, leaving her bookbag behind on the sidewalk.

Dennis sat down beside the bag, cradling his injured arm. The real pain was inside, his heart ripping apart.

How could he have messed up so badly? He'd abandoned Amanda unknowingly long ago and devoted the last two years of his life to a daughter that wasn't real. Now he was abandoning the daughter he loved to try to save a wild animal who wanted nothing to do with him.

Life was a mess. Jack was right. He should leave it to the hired help, get on the plane, and fly out.

Jack got back into the cab and the driver said, "To the airport, now?"

Dennis hesitated a moment.

"No. Take me to my daughter's house."

Heather answered the door. She took one look and wrapped herself around his legs, screaming, "Daddy! Grandma! Daddy's here!"

Ling walked to the door, her eyes wide.

"I'm sorry I didn't call first," Dennis said. "I had a little trouble figuring out some things."

"Does it hurt?" Heather asked. "Grandma said you were in an auto accident."

He looked at Ling and smiled. *Sometimes, the best way to lie is to tell the truth.*

"It hurt more to be away from you." Dennis leaned over and kissed the top of her head. Her hair smelled fresh and sweet—like flowers.

This was his real daughter. Not Amanda.

"I'm glad you're here but what about your work?"

Dennis looked up at Ling. "I wanted to talk to your grandma privately about that."

"You didn't lose your job did you? It's okay if you did. You can live with us and we'll finally be together all the time."

He smiled and stared into her eyes. It felt so good to touch her. VR was not the same as being there.

"No. Everything's fine. I had my attorney explain to everyone that I'd be gone for a couple of weeks while I heal."

He looked into Ling's eyes. "Your grandma and I need to

Absolute Magnitude

talk about some things. Can you give us some privacy for a few minutes?"

"Now? But you just got here."

"Just a few minutes. We won't be long. I promise."

Heather started towards the hallway then turned. "Is something bad going to happen?"

"No. I've had enough bad things happen this week. I'd like to see a few good things happen."

Heather turned and moved very slowly down the hallway. Dennis waited to hear the click of her door closing and then glanced down to hallway to be sure the door was thoroughly shut before sitting down on the chair in front of the computer desk.

Dennis leaned forward and spoke softly.

"I've decided that I want Heather to be my daughter. My real daughter. I'm calling my attorney in the morning to ask him to draw up the legal papers necessary to adopt her."

Heather spoke from the hallway. "Why would a father need to adopt his daughter?"

He turned and stared. Heather stood in the hallway, her eyes full of tears. Dennis turned to Ling. Her face was pale and she'd aged twenty years in the last minute.

"The vent," Heather said. "I could hear you through the furnace vent." Her voice broke and sobs tears ran down her face. "I wanted to hear the surprise. I thought it might be a trip or maybe you were coming home to stay."

She turned to Ling. "Why? Why did you lie to me all these years?"

Heather turned to Dennis next. "You lied to me."

She whirled around and ran down the hallway, crying. The door slammed shut loudly behind her and Dennis heard the lock click into place.

He sagged against the computer, feeling his body shatter into a thousand pieces and wishing Jenny's boyfriend had succeeded in killing him.

From two daughters to no daughters.

"Let me talk to her tonight," Ling said. "I will explain. This time I will tell her the entire truth."

Dennis spent most of the morning on the telephone with his attorney and then his accountant. He needed to get back to work. Some of his creditors were calling in his loans since hearing about the legal problems and he'd never had a real financial cushion. Every spare penny he earned had gone to Amanda—or so he thought at the time.

He stared at the phone a few moments before picking it up again to call Ling. If he was lucky, Heather might answer.

"Hello," Ling said.

"Mrs. Choi, hello. This is Dennis Nguyen. Is Heather any better this morning?"

She burst into tears.

"Mrs. Choi? Mrs. Choi? Hello? What's wrong?"

"Heather. Ran Away. Gone."

"What?"

"I talked to her last night. I told her about Amanda and Mrs. Ryman and everything. She was upset but then said everything was all right. This morning, she is gone."

Dennis closed his eyes, visualizing a thousand possible ways a little girl could be hurt in that neighborhood.

"Have you called the police?"

She burst into tears again and Dennis waited, his throat clenched tight and his palms sweating. He could barely hold the receiver in his hand and his head throbbed with a sudden headache.

When Ling finally slowed down enough to pay attention to him, Dennis spoke softly and slowly. "Listen to me carefully. I need to know. Is her VR suit missing?"

"What?"

"Her VR suit. Is it still there?"

"Wait a minute. I will check."

Dennis waiting, hoping what he was thinking was wrong.

The phone clicked. Ling was back.

"The suit is gone. The stuffed panda is gone and her picture of you—" She stopped and burst into tears again.

"Yes? What about it?"

"It is torn. Pieces all over the floor."

She started crying again.

Dennis couldn't wait any longer. If he was right, he only had a little time. If he was wrong, then he might die for nothing.

"Call the police. Tell them to go to Amanda's house."

"Amanda? But why? Heather and Amanda barely know one another."

"I think they do now."

Dennis picked up the phone and called the school. He coughed and lowered his voice to a soft rasp, hoping they'd believe he was Mrs. Choi with a bad cold.

It worked when he was a kid and pretended to be his mom, calling in sick for himself.

No, Heather wasn't there. Should they be concerned?

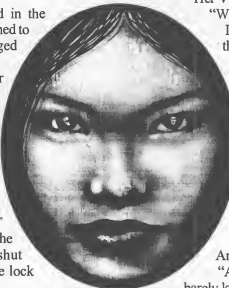
Why not? He was.

Yes. Of course they would notify the police. Be calm.

Dennis stared into the mirror. His arm was still in a sling and it hurt like hell. He couldn't do anything like this? Could he?

He stared, a hazy memory fighting itself to the surface. The shooting. The wild car ride. Police. Emergency technicians stuffing him into a body suit that looked very similar to his VR suit.

Great for reducing shock and it helped keep all the body parts in place until the doctors could get to the ER patients.



Virtual Daughter

He grinned and pulled his VR suit out of the closet.

Dennis bit back a scream when he pulled the sleeve up his arm. Once it was on, the arm didn't hurt as much any more. He could almost move it.

Dennis called for a cab and offered a large tip if the cab could be there in five minutes. He grabbed his helmet, tossed the gloves inside, then scooped up everything else he might possibly need and headed down to the parking lot to wait for the cab.

It arrived in four minutes. He handed the driver a bill and told him the address. The driver flinched and asked if he was sure about that address. Dennis nodded.

"Playing games at someone's house?" he asked.

"Something like that."

Dennis pulled on the gloves and everything else he needed, saving his wallet until last. He paid the driver then stuffed the wallet into his fanny pack.

A wave of heat rolled across him as he stepped out of the cab.

The suit wasn't intended for outdoor use. It was going to be a hot rescue.

Or a fool's errand.

The windows were all open. He looked through one, recording equipment running. The room was littered with papers, magazines, junk. Nothing interesting.

Dennis moved around the house to the next window and peeked inside.

Jackpot!

There were no posters or pictures in this room to cover the peeling wallpaper that may have been popular half a century ago. The room was strangely devoid of all possessions. No books. No toys. Only a small pile of discarded clothing betrayed the fact that this was Amanda's room.

A small, soiled mattress without any bedding laid on the floor. Tossed casually atop the mattress was Heather's VR suit and her panda.

She was here. Someplace.

Time to put on the helmet and set the suit on record/broadcast to his attorney's office. If something happened to him now—

Dennis stepped back slightly and felt something poking into his back. He whirled around and stared into the eyes of a walking skeleton.

"Jenny?"

She smiled and her eyes lit up with an intensity that sent a cold chill racing up his sweat-soaked spine. The gun in her hands looked far too big and heavy for her to hold but he had a bad feeling that she wasn't having any trouble at all.

"How nice of you to pay a return visit."

Dennis opened his mouth to speak then shut it again. All he had to do was wait until the police arrived. If he lived that long.

"Inside, Mr. Big Shot."

"Jenny? I—"

"Now!"

Inside the door, Heather was sitting on a floor cluttered with debris. Her grandmother was in a wobbly chair beside her, bound and gagged.

Ling's eyes were full of apology and Dennis knew she hadn't called the police.

Erm said he would but that didn't mean the police would arrive here.

This time, there was no way out. Jenny had never been rational, even before she became addicted. It was impossible to know in advance what would calm her and what would set her off on a rage.

Dennis glanced quickly around the house. No screens were on the windows and the house was filled with flies. Papers littered the floor and the table in the next room overflowed with boxes, unopened mail and whatever happened to be dropped on it at the moment. From the next room, he could hear the sound of dishes clattering.

Jenny's boyfriend is washing dishes?

"On the floor, Dennis. Next to your virtual daughter." Jenny turned and yelled over her shoulder, "Come get a good look at your father."

Amanda walked into the room holding a wet rag that he suspected passed for a towel. Her eyes were huge and swollen. A bruise was forming on the left side of her face and she barely glanced at him.

Amanda was the one washing the dishes.

Jenny hadn't called for her boyfriend so maybe they had a chance. One strong man should be able to overcome a bone-thin woman and a little girl.

With a gun?

If I do, I might get shot. If I don't, I will get shot.

He needed an opportunity. *Stall.*

"You seem to have kicked your addiction."

She laughed. The sick sound rippled through the house and sent panic racing through his sweating body.

She pointed to the illegal connection. "Your attorney's idea. Didn't he tell you? They severed my connection. Permanently. I can still wear the external fixtures but the only way I can wire myself now is for pain. I have to use old-fashioned drugs and those are expensive and very difficult to obtain."

Her grip tightened on the gun and her eyes blazed. "Why, Dennis? Why are you carrying out this sick vendetta against me?"



Absolute Magnitude

His mouth fell open. She believed that. Really believed it.

"I wanted to see my daughter."

"Now? Out of the blue?" Tears formed in Jenny's eyes and rolled down her cheeks. "I gave you a daughter and where were you? You never returned my calls or e-mail and then you called every place where I applied for work and told them not to hire me."

Dennis stared up at her. *What universe is she living in?*

He glanced over at Heather. She should have been terrified but instead, she looked up at him with confidence, certain her dad would save her.

Amanda was a different story. She was staring down at the floor, her arms hanging limp by her side and the dish cloth dangling from her hand.

Has anything good ever happened in her life? What's it been like, living with a crazy woman and a man whose picture should be in the dictionary next to 'parasite'?

"I never called anyone," Dennis spoke as slowly and calmly as he could manage.

"Liar!" The gun shook in her hand. "You stole everything from me. I was good. Damn good. You were afraid and jealous so you got me fired. Then, when I didn't rush into your arms and turn into a helpless female, you decided to see to it that I never worked again. If it hadn't been for Rusty, I would never have survived."

Amanda looked up at Rusty's name. Her eyes widened and her left hand rubbed her cheek.

Heather's fingers dug into his arm and when he looked down at her, fear had replaced the confidence in her eyes. Ling stared at them, tears running down her face.

He looked back at Heather and then Amanda.

"Nice substitute, right?" Jenny asked.

She was smiling but her eyes were pure steel.

"I knew you'd prefer Heather. Ling was always talking about what a perfect child she was. Not like Amanda."

Jenny turned to Amanda. "Not stupid. Not clumsy. Never whining or complaining."

Dennis eased forward slightly, sweat soaking his VR suit. His eyes were focused on the gun. He dived.

They struggled and he screamed, pain flooding his body when he tried to use his arm.

He succeeded only in knocking the gun out of her hand and it slid across the floor.

Heather and Amanda raced for it. Amanda won.

"Give me the gun," Jenny said.

Amanda hesitated.

"Don't do it," Dennis said. "Do you want to spend your life like this? They're bound to arrest her and then where will you be? I'll be dead, your mom will be in jail."

"Don't listen to him."

Amanda glanced back and forth, the gun still firmly gripped.

"Maybe Rusty will take you in," Dennis said. It was a cheap shot but it worked. Amanda handed the gun to him but as Dennis's hands closed on the gun, something landed on him.

Rusty!

They rolled and the next thing he knew, Dennis was staring up at the ceiling and staring up into the barrel of the gun.

Rusty turned slightly, looking towards Amanda.

"You little bitch. Just wait until I get my hands on you later."

Something inside Dennis snapped. Maybe he was giddy from the heat. Maybe it was just knowing that he was going to die anyway and being determined to go out in style.

Whatever it was, he rolled half a turn and kicked Rusty as hard as he could in the groin.

The pistol fell and the room rocked with the explosion.

Dennis screamed at Heather. "Untie her and run!"

Heather ran, taking the screen door off its one hinge on her way out. Amanda raced to untie Ling.

Dennis barely saw them disappear out the door as he grabbed for the gun.

Rusty reached it first. He turned, his lips spreading across his face in a gross smile.

"No!" Jenny screamed.

Dennis struggled to sit up, leaning against the wall and cradling his injured arm. Was he hearing right? Jenny wanted to spare him?

"Let me do it," she said.

Dennis closed his eyes. It was over. He was dead.



Virtual Daughter

At least I got my daughters out of here.

He heard a rush of footsteps then someone jumped, landing on him as the shot rang out.

Amanda! No!

Dennis opened his eyes and stared down at Heather.

"I was scared," she mumbled. Her words faded to a soft whisper and he had to lean forward to hear. "But I came back. I love you, Daddy."

Her eyes closed; the entire world faded away. Time stopped and he turned, stunned by how slowly the flies buzzed around him.

He jumped up, grabbed the gun out of Jenny's hand and threw it out the window. He watched it float, tumbling end over end until it disappeared from sight.

He turned back to Jenny the words crept slowly from her throat. "Now look what you made me do."

He hit her. She fell and he moved closer, his hands reaching for her neck.

Rusty slammed him against the floor and wrapped his hands around Dennis's neck, squeezing tighter and tighter until Dennis felt himself standing somewhere else, watching his own death.

A shot rang out and Rusty collapsed on Dennis. He turned slowly towards the door, expecting to see a police officer. Instead, he saw Amanda holding the gun and staring at Heather's body.

Ling raced past Amanda and pulled off her blouse, using it in a futile attempt to slow the flow of blood from Heather's body.

It was hopeless. Nothing could apply enough pressure to stop the tidal wave of blood flowing from Heather's body.

Except a VR suit.

Dennis ran back to Amanda's room and grabbed the suit. Carefully, fighting panic, he and Ling slid Heather into the suit and fastened it while Amanda called 9-1-1.

Dennis rode the glass elevator down to the hotel lobby. The doors opened and he nearly gagged on the aroma of burning bacon drifting in the air from the breakfast buffet.

Another favorite hotel ruined by its desire to impress its American tourists. He didn't want an American breakfast in Paris. Maybe there was a street vendor—

"Dennis! Is that you?"

Dennis turned around and stared at Carol. "Carol? I don't believe it. What's it been now? A year? Ten months."

She smiled. "It's good to see you again. Care to join me for breakfast? We can catch up on each other's lives over some undercooked eggs and bacon floating in grease."

"I'd love to but I'm waiting for—here they come."

The elevator doors opened and Ling, Amanda, and

Heather stepped out.

Carol looked at the girls and smiled. She held out her hand to Heather. "I know you. Your Daddy showed me a picture of you. You're Amanda, right?"

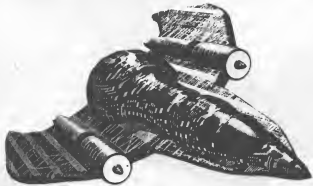
She shook her head.

"I'm Amanda," Amanda said. "This is my sister, Heather, and my grandma Choi."

Carol stepped back a pace and turned to Dennis, her eyes full of questions.

He smiled. "Why don't you join us in hunting for a good sidewalk cafe for breakfast and I'll fill you in on all the details. It's been an interesting year and for what it's worth, you were right."

Amanda opened the door and they stepped outside, through the shadows of ghosts, into the sunlight.



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Blockade Runner

by Jamie Wild

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Captain Joseph Jackson looked at the pirate ship floating dead in space. It had given the *Hawk* one hell of a fight, but now it would be silent forevermore. Normally Jackson's command would have been a large battleship, but this mission saw him with a crew of just three, including himself. Information arrayed itself across the screen of his VR helmet, but not nearly as much as he was used to evaluating in situations such as these. "Mr. Pain, status report," Jackson demanded of his one man in engineering.

"Pain here, all systems operational. Lasers three and five came close to redline, but they're cooling down now. Our shields are at one hundred percent."

Jackson nodded and looked over at his other crew member, Ensign Chris Grogan. Chris didn't look good; her face was pale and ashen, and she was all but slumped over her weapons console.

"Chris, you should get yourself to the autodoc."

Grogan grunted and pulled herself out from behind her weapons console. With a slight push she sent herself floating towards the door.

Suddenly a light cruiser dropped out of Faster Than Light space, and headed straight for the *Hawk*. The cruiser wasn't transmitting an ID beacon.

Jackson took a deep breath; no ID beacon meant only one thing: another pirate. "All hands, battle stations, I repeat, all hands, battle stations." Despite her obvious discomfort, Grogan stopped, spun herself around, and resumed her position behind the weapons console with a tired grunt. Jackson wondered how long she could hold up. Pneumonia was not a thing to trifle with, especially in the zero G of space where fluids just didn't drain from the lungs. He had to get her inside a gravity well, then she'd get better. Jackson ran his fingers over his console and not for the first time he wondered if this mission was cursed.

Data on the pirate's laser cannons streamed across his vision. Jackson's job was to make sure that the pirate's cannons never locked onto the *Hawk*. He did this by monitoring the positions of the cannons' barrels. The laser beam would travel at the speed of light; Jackson's reflexes could not compensate for that, but he could react to the pirate's repeated attempts to lock onto the *Hawk*. When the enemy's laser cannons moved, the *Hawk* moved. The enemy would try to trap him into a position where it was impossible to avoid all of their beams. Jackson was the best in the business at remaining clear. That was why he was piloting this courier.

The pirate ships hadn't figured out yet that the *Hawk* wasn't the innocent courier that she appeared to be, but they would. Grogan brought all of the *Hawk*'s weapons on line and

fired off everything at her disposal. Jackson watched as the *Hawk*'s guns savaged the pirate vessel. After only fifteen seconds the pirate's shields cracked and the ship rocked with explosions. How many more times would they have to play out this scene before they could get home safely? Could they get home safely?

"Nice job, Chris," Jackson said, turning to Grogan while lifting his VR helmet's visor. Jackson couldn't see her at her station. It took him a moment to realize that she was floating unconscious just behind it. Jackson rushed to her. Her breathing was little more than a coughing, wheezing gasp, and her pulse was weak. He grabbed her and got her to the autodoc just outside the small bridge. He strapped her in and the machine affixed the appropriate probes by itself. The *Hawk* wasn't big enough to have a cryochamber, but if it had Jackson would have placed Grogan directly into it. Better to freeze someone with pneumonia than try and treat it in space.

"Damn," Jackson swore under his breath as he went back to the bridge. This was not good. It wouldn't be much longer before the Coalition stopped playing this pirate game and came after him with their big guns. He needed Grogan to be okay; they wouldn't last long out here without an experienced gunner. The new FTL engine and its design *had* to get back to Earth before war broke out, otherwise Earth was doomed. From what Jackson understood, the new engine was geared to move through a different level of hyperspace. The current engines, he was told, moved through what many called the eighth dimension. Its workings made use of the unified field theory. This new engine accessed a different dimension than the current models, which cut the time of a given trip by three fourths.

"Captain," The computer's cold voice said, "I'm sorry to report that Ensign Grogan is dead."

Jackson closed his eyes and rubbed them with his coarse fingers. Grogan had been a good friend, she'd volunteered for this mission when she'd heard that Jackson would be transferring to the *Hawk*. Jackson had explained to her how dangerous the mission was and she'd still wanted to come. Neither of them could have imagined that her undoing wouldn't be the mission's dangers, but a simply infection that brought on pneumonia. Damn, but war, even an undeclared war, was hell. He wanted to grieve for her, but he couldn't; not yet, there was too much to be done. He had to get the *Hawk* home. He checked his charts and found that Eden was the closest planet to his present coordinates. Not liking it, Jackson laid in a course for Eden. He needed to find a gunner. It just wouldn't be possible for him and Pain to split the duties required to get the *Hawk* home. He had to find another gunner!

Absolute Magnitude

Jackson was very discouraged. He'd been sitting in dry doc on Eden for a full week and no one had answered his ad. Things weren't bad enough between Earth and the Coalition for the Coalition to strike openly. At least Jackson hoped they weren't. Sitting here was not a good thing. It gave the wrong people time to figure out where he was. Worse than that, Eden had set up a reclamation plant around the space port. The whole damn place stank more than anything Jackson could have imagined before setting down here.

The intercom channel came to life and a voice said, "Excuse me, I'm interested in applying for the gunnery tech position."

Jackson brightened. "Step inside and take the elevator. It only has one destination, you can't get lost."

Moments later a man stepped out of the elevator and onto the bridge. He was tall, good looking, and athletic. He looked like he'd just stepped off a recruiting poster for the marines.

"Welcome aboard," Jackson boomed. "I'm Captain Jackson, and you are?"

"Tom Anderson."

"If I may ask, what brings you to this tropical paradise?"

"Until yesterday, I was a member of the Coalition's marine corps. My hitch ran out, and the *Avenger* dropped me off here."

Oh shit, Jackson thought. Just what I need, a plant from the Coalition. I'd better play it as if I believe him. Maybe I can get some information from him.

"My God, man, why didn't you re-up? Five years as a marine has got to be better than a week on this planet."

"I did re-up, sir. The Coalition chose not to consider my commission for renewal."

"Why do you suppose the *Avenger* was scheduled to be on Eden when your commission ran out?"

"To be honest with you, I assume that Captain Chen considered it a comment on my worth as an officer. We were not on good terms."

Jackson sighed. "May I see your disk." Anderson handed it to him, and Jackson slid it into the console of his ship's computer. "If you wouldn't mind?" he said, motioning towards the scanner. Anderson showed the scanner his thumb and it came to life. The disk's directory appeared in the air before Jackson. He went immediately to Anderson's work history. Damn this guy's record was something. "Seventeen decorations, very impressive. It's been more than twenty years since you've been a gunnery sergeant, though, *Major*."

"Yes, sir, it has, but I've kept up with the field. I'm sure that a few hours of simulation with your system will have me up to snuff."

Jackson continued reading. "I thought I recognized your name, you're Anderson The Enforcer. You were brought before a Court of Inquiry last year."

"Yes, and I was cleared of all charges."

Jackson smiled. "I remember it. You got quite a lot of publicity. It's not often that a man gets taped telling his

commanding officer to go fuck himself, and is still found innocent of insubordination."

"My actions were justified."

"Could you refresh my memory on that?"

"Certainly. The *Avenger* was deployed in orbit around New Haven. The planetary government was dealing with an armed insurrection. We were called in to put a stop to it. On an urban planet, guerilla warfare's not an easy thing to deal with; but through good intelligence and some disinformation on our part, we were able to trick the guerillas into committing their entire force. Chen ordered me out in the middle of the operation. If I'd pulled out at that point, my casualties would have been unacceptable. Worse, I probably wouldn't have gotten another chance to engage the enemy *en masse*. As the situation stood, I cleaned up the rebel forces in less than an hour. Had I followed Chen's orders, we'd still be there. It wasn't Chen's place to radio in orders during a combat operation; so, I told him to go fuck himself."

"It seems to me that there must have been a more politic way of saying that to him."

"Undoubtedly there was, sir."

Well, the guy had balls, Jackson had to give him that. And he sure didn't seem like the kind of person the Coalition would use as a plant. He hadn't even tried to conceal his ties to the Coalition. "Do you have any idea why Chen ordered you out?"

"None."

"You put me in an awkward position."

"How so?"

"I desperately need a gunnery tech, but I can't trust anyone affiliated with the Coalition."

"As of 0900 hours this morning, my affiliation with the Coalition ended."

Jackson sighed. "What choice do I have? I need a gunnery tech. Mr. Anderson, I want you to know that your weapons board will be monitored closely. If there is any sign of deception you will be held in solitary confinement until we reach Earth. There, you will be tried as an enemy of the state. After a trial, you will be executed. Do you understand?"

Anderson looked shocked. Good, Jackson thought. If this guy's expression hadn't changed I'd be worried. Hell, I'm still worried, but I need a gunnery tech.

"I understand," Anderson said.

"Here are the details." All the details that you need to know. "The *Hawk* is headed for Tristen. Once we're there, your services will no longer be required. I'm authorized to offer you two thousand units for the job. Before you accept it, you should know that we're likely to see action. We've been out for three months, and in that time we've had to defend ourselves six times."

"But, sir, this sector is well patrolled by Coalition vessels. I can't imagine that anyone would dare attempt something between here and Tristen."

Blockade Runner

"You're not from Earth; we have a different opinion as to how safe Coalition space is. If you're a merchant flying from any one of their ninety seven planets, you can count on them, otherwise—"

"Politics."

"Exactly."

"Before I sign on, could you tell me what happened to your previous gunnery tech?"

"She came down with a shipboard flu which turned into pneumonia and died of complications brought on by dehydration."

"I guess I'm in."

Jackson smiled. "Welcome aboard. We go by first names here, Tom. Mine's Joseph or Joe, whichever you prefer."

Anderson was obviously surprised by Jackson's identity. I wonder if he just realized who he's talking with? Jackson mused. "Would you like me to send someone for your belongings?"

"No, they're right outside. I've only been on the planet for a few hours."

"Let me assure you, Tom, you missed nothing."

Jackson watched as Anderson stowed his gear and started working with the ship's gunnery simulator. It took Anderson an hour or so to really get a feel for the ship's guns, but once he had, he was topnotch. This guy had talent, he might even be better than Grogan had been.

"You have no idea how pleased I am by your handling of the ship's guns," Jackson said, after Anderson turned off the simulator.

"Thanks," Anderson replied. "Are we that likely to run into trouble?"

"I'm afraid so. We've been sitting on this planet for a week hoping to find a gunner. If you hadn't happened along when you did, we would have left without one. We've been here too long. I'm sure someone has figured out our location." Jackson was trying to get some kind of a reaction from that statement, but Anderson remained quiet. "It's late," Jackson said, "I'm turning in. We leave at 0600 hours. See you in the morning."

"Good night, sir."

Jackson had a tough time getting to sleep. Anderson being on board brought all kinds of anxiety with it. He needed a gunnery tech, no two ways about it, but this man had been very important to the Coalition. *The goddamn Enforcer!* He was their go to guy. If the situation was important they put Anderson in charge of it. If the Coalition really had discharged him, they were out of their fucking minds—especially with war on the horizon. Eventually sleep came and offered Jackson a small measure of peace.

In the morning, Jackson got to the bridge well before Anderson. "So what do you think of Mr. Anderson?" Jackson asked Dan Pain, over a secure channel.

"Well, Joseph, since you asked, I don't really like the idea of having a Coalition man on our guns."

"Do you think he's still a Coalition man?"

"I talked with him at length last night, he might be on the up-and-up. If it were me, I'd never waste Anderson as a plant. He was just too important in his regular capacity. Still, it makes me nervous. Maybe he's the perfect plant?"

Jackson sighed. "I'm inclined to believe Anderson. He was on board the *Avengeur*. That's Chen's ship. Anderson made him look like quite the fool, and Chen's the kind of man to hold a grudge, even to the point of hurting himself. Looks as though he may have hurt the entire Coalition this time. If things go the way they look to be going, Anderson would be invaluable to the Coalition."

"Sir," the computer's voice broke in, "Anderson has just left his room."

Moments later Anderson entered the bridge. "Good morning, Tom," Jackson said, with a cheerful smile. "Are you a coffee drinker?"

"Only in the morning."

"Let me guess, black?"

"No, sir, light and sweet."

"I had you pegged as one of those hard-as-nails marines who drinks his coffee black and his whiskey straight."

"I'm afraid not."

Jackson chuckled and got Anderson a cup of coffee.

At exactly 0600 hours, the *Hawk* was ready for liftoff.

"All stations report secure for lift off, Captain," the computer said.

Jackson activated the ship's radio. "E.F.S. *Hawk* to Port Control. We are ready for lift off. Request clearance?"

"Control to E.F.S. *Hawk*. You have clearance. We hope that you enjoyed your stay here on Eden and that we'll see you again, soon."

"Not bloody likely," Jackson replied. "All stations prepare for lift off, lift off in one minute."

The sixty seconds elapsed and Jackson took her up. He did so expertly and confidently through tricky wind patterns.

"Coalition destroyer entering the system," the computer announced.

It was obvious that the ship was on an intercept course. "Anderson, prepare to fire, on my order."

"But, sir," Anderson objected, "that's a Coalition vessel." Jackson's turned sharply to Anderson. "If that ship attempts to interfere with a vessel of a sovereign state, it's piracy. I don't care what colors they're flying; I will defend myself. Now do as you're ordered."

Anderson began scanning the Coalition ship with the *Hawk*'s instruments.

Then Jackson opened up a channel. "Coalition vessel, this is the E.F.S. *Hawk*, please acknowledge."

"E.F.S. *Hawk*, this is the C.S. *Treader*. Prepare to be boarded."

"*Treader*, this is Captain Joseph Jackson of the Earth Federation Navy, I would like to speak to your Captain."

"Captain Jackson, this is Lieutenant Commander Avery. I'm in command of the *Treader*."

Absolute Magnitude

"What is the meaning of this? You cannot board my vessel."

"Captain, we have a report of contraband on your vessel. We must inspect."

"In accordance with Resolution 101, Section D, of the United Planets, which states that 'no military vessel of a sovereign state may be subject to search by another sovereign state,' I must respectfully decline your request to board."

"We didn't request permission to board, we demanded it. There are ample precedence, under that resolution, for my actions."

"There just might be, but my ship is also protected from unlawful boarding by the Earth Coalition Treaty of 2205. To that Treaty, there are no exceptions. Any attempt to board my ship will be considered an act of piracy."

"Enough of the bravado, I've got the armament to force a boarding. You have five minutes to prepare for boarding. *Treader* out."

"Mister Avery, you have badly underestimated your opponent," Jackson said sliding his VR helmet on. "Anderson, fire at will."

Jackson could see that Anderson was hesitant to fire on a Coalition vessel. This would be the moment that would tell whether or not Anderson could be trusted. Jackson hadn't expected it to be so soon. He was relieved when Anderson fired off four missiles in quick succession.

The *Treader's* anti-missile fire came to life immediately, as did their offensive fire. Jackson threw the *Hawk* into evasive maneuvers. Anderson would need as much help as he could get if he was to fire both offensively and defensively. At this point, Jackson's only responsibility was to keep the *Hawk* out of harm's way long enough for Anderson to stop the *Treader*. If the *Hawk* took any damage, its shields would be punished. A courier's shields wouldn't stand up to a lot of punishment.

The *Treader* was having increased difficulty keeping up with the number of missiles that Anderson was throwing at it. Finally, the *Treader* broke off its offensive fire and concentrated on defensive fire.

"The *Avenger* and its escort have just launched from Eden," the computer announced.

Shit, Jackson thought, they must have just found out what we have on board. Otherwise they would've taken us out in port. "How long until we're within range of their big guns?"

"No more than ten minutes, sir," was the reply.

"Damn, we can't just break it off with the *Treader*, that would be suicide. Anderson, how long before you crack through the *Treader's* defenses?"

"Not soon enough, sir."

"Can you get anything more out of the ship's guns?"

"I'm all ready firing at eighty percent capacity on all systems. Any higher than that and the weapons systems won't hold up."

"They don't have to hold up for long. They just have to disable the *Treader*. If we don't get out of here now, we never

will. Anderson, melt the guns!" Jackson diverted some of his attention from piloting to watch Anderson handle the guns. It certainly looked as if Anderson was throwing everything the *Hawk* had at the *Treader*.

"Lasers seven and eight are down, as well as torpedo bay three. All weapons systems are showing systems' warnings. It's going to be damn close, Captain," Anderson said.

"Do what you have to, but put the *Treader* down!" Jackson replied.

When lasers one, two, and five went down, Jackson didn't think that the *Hawk* was going to make it. But then a missile got through the *Treader's* defensive laser fire. All the *Hawk's* screens were overloaded from the resulting explosion. When the screens cleared it was apparent that the *Treader* would never be spaceworthy again.

"Got them, Captain. We're ready to pull out."

"Good job, Anderson."

"Captain, the *Avenger* has opened fire with torpedoes," the computer informed him.

"Can we stay ahead of them long enough to get to faster-than-light drive?"

"Negative."

"Anderson, can you handle them?"

"Not with just three lasers."

"Damn! Pain, report on laser weapons system."

"Captain," came the reply. "Lasers one and five are completely fried. Seven and eight are repairable, I'm not sure about three."

"Get on the repairs, we need those lasers now."

"Will do, sir."

The *Hawk* sped out of the system, with an ever increasing number of torpedoes following it. Despite what appeared to be Anderson's best efforts, the torpedoes gained on the *Hawk*.

"Sir, we're not going to make it," Anderson said through clenched teeth.

"Just keep at it, Anderson, we *have* to make it."

By the time the number eight laser flashed operable, Jackson had given up hope. But with the added fire power, Anderson was able to slow the rate that the missiles were gaining on the *Hawk*. When laser seven flashed operable Jackson knew they'd make it.

"At the present rate, the *Hawk* will make it to faster-than-light thirty seconds before the missiles overtake the ship," the computer announced without emotion.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Now if the lasers would just hold up, everything would be fine.

"All hands prepare for faster-than-light drive," Jackson said, "faster-than-light drive in sixty seconds."

The computer began a count down. When the transition to faster-than-light came, it was quick. One moment everything was normal and the next, everyone's stomachs slammed into their Adam's apples. The unpleasant sensation ended quickly. The only lasting effect of their increased speed was that everything had a light tint of blue or red.

Blockade Runner

"We're home free," Jackson announced. "We didn't pull any of the missiles along with us." That settled it in Jackson's mind. Anderson was on the up and up.

"Captain, what just happened?" Anderson asked.

"Tom, you served aboard the *Avenger*, right?"

"Yes."

"And until recently, the *Avenger* spent most of its time on or near the frontier. Am I right?"

"I don't see what that has to do with anything."

"Back here in the center, things have been heating up between the Coalition and Earth. I'm afraid war may not be far off. Both sides have been keeping it quiet, but I'm surprised that the Coalition is keeping it from their officers."

"Look, I know that relations are strained between Earth and the Coalition. That's nothing new, but open combat?"

"In all honesty, it doesn't happen often, and when it does the Earth vessel doesn't usually survive."

"I can imagine. The Coalition out-guns you something like two hundred to one."

"That's a problem, but Earth is not willing to give up space travel. That's the only thing that will make the Coalition happy, a complete monopoly on all space travel and exploration."

"But Earth against the Coalition, that's not war, that's target practice."

Jackson nodded grimly. "You're right about that, but old Mother Earth isn't willing to just role over and cede all of space to the Coalition. It's that simple. They want everything, and we're not willing to give up what we have."

This seemed to put Anderson back a few paces, but he didn't ask any more questions. Jackson turned to piloting issues. Now that they were moving faster-than-light they didn't have anything to worry about. They couldn't be tracked or fired on. It was just a two week cruise now. Nothing could happen to them until they reached Tristen.

Jackson made sure that the computer monitored Anderson during the entire trip. He needn't have. While Anderson seemed preoccupied, he certainly didn't try to sabotage the ship. Hell, he didn't even attempt to learn anything about the ship. He'd been interested in the political situation and that was it. He spent his time either reading or working out in the small zero G gym.

Jackson didn't invite Anderson to the bridge when they reached Tristen. The chances that the *Hawk* would need her gunner here was slim. Three Earth Federation battleships and their escorts were meeting the *Hawk*. If Jackson needed Anderson he could get to the bridge quickly. It was a small ship. Jackson didn't want him learning anything more about the *Hawk*'s mission than he might already know.

The ship's transition from faster-than-light went smoothly. Everything was calm in real space, but the Earth Federation ships were not at the rendezvous point. Jackson took a deep breath. Couldn't anything go right? Tristen was one of two moons circling a Jovian class planet. Despite the inhospitable

conditions, Tristen was an important stop on the trade route and had a sizable population. He sent a tight beam message to an Earth agent on Tristen.

A moment later he was talking with the agent. "Can you apprise me of the current situation? We were supposed to rendezvous with an escort. They seem to be elsewhere."

"Yes, sir, they were held up. My latest information leads me to believe that they will be here within forty-eight hours."

"Damn. Does the Coalition have any forces in system?"

"Nothing to speak of."

"Anything else I should be aware of?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Good, thank you," Jackson said, as he broke the connection. He then made arrangements for Anderson to be picked up by a shuttle. Jackson had no intention of being trapped in Tristen's gravity well at an inopportune moment. Anderson would go out in a habitat bubble and a shuttle would pull him in. The cost was equal to the pay that Anderson had made as a gunnery tech, but Jackson thought it was well worth it.

Jackson grew more impatient with each passing moment. This was not the way it was supposed to go. Something had to have gone wrong. He waited for three more hours before what was left of his escort arrived.

The Earth ships came out of FTL at near light speed. "E.F.S. *Hawk*, this is the E.F.S. *Massachusetts*. You are ordered to get out of system immediately. Repeat, leave the system immediately."

"*Massachusetts*, can you give me any information?"

"No time, get out of the system!"

Jackson didn't hesitate, to much was at stake. Jackson needed forty second to reach the escape perimeter. He watched the confrontation unfold behind him.

The Earth ships all reversed thrust immediately and opened fire on Coalition ships as they hit real space. And then something happened that shocked Jackson. Several of the Earth ships rammed into Coalition ships. There was no doubt in Jackson's mind that all hands had been lost in that maneuver. And then the *Hawk* was in FTL space again. Jackson very shaken lifted his VR visor.

"Jesus H. Christ!" Pain said, rushing out of the elevator and onto the bridge. "What the fuck did they think they were doing?" Pain asked.

"I'd say covering our ass," Jackson replied, quietly.

"Joseph, those collisions weren't an accident. They rammed."

Jackson had watched the battle unfolding behind them as they'd run and he was badly shaken by it. It had been a long time since an Earth Federation ship had rammed an enemy. Everyone on those ships had to have known they were going to die. He could almost imagine himself on the bridge listening to the computer count down to impact, to the end of his life. God, that had to have been horrible. The courage that these people had shown was immense. ▀

Absolute Magnitude

"Do you think we're at war?" Pain asked, his voice wavering.

Jackson shook his head. "There's no telling. I think it's clear that the Coalition has figured out what our cargo is. Obviously, they're willing to commit an act of war to stop us from getting home, but are they willing to go to war to prevent us from having it?"

"I can't believe that the Coalition would have attacked a battle group without declaring war."

"We're not in a position to know that, but we'll have to assume the worst and fire at all Coalition vessels on sight."

Jackson looked over the ship's controls. The *Hawk* was about to drop out of FTL space and into the Rada planetary system. Pain had been able to fix or replace all of the ship's broken weapons system, but they didn't have a gunnery tech to fire them. The computer's auto fire program was up and running. Nevertheless, Jackson had no illusions as to how much good that would do him. It would never stand up to a human gunner in a battle. It wasn't good for much other than shooting down missiles before they got through to the *Hawk*. If they ran into a Coalition vessel, Jackson would be forced to turn tail and run. That wouldn't be good. The ship's engines were fueled atomically, so that wasn't a problem, but he and Pain were down to three days worth of food. They had to pick up supplies. Jackson thought about all the modifications to the *Hawk*. The ship was fast, real fast, and that was why he was almost out of supplies. The space that the engine took up was usually reserved for emergency rations. Normally, he could have jumped from Tristan to Earth if he'd needed to. It was a long jump, longer than anyone liked to go in a single hop, but possible if you had enough food.

Totally unprepared for the worst, the *Hawk* dropped into real space. Jackson cursed as he read the information that filled his helmet's screen. There was a Coalition cruiser between the *Hawk* and Rada. Normally the *Hawk* could have taken the ship with little more than a second thought, but not without a gunner. Damn, we need food, but there's no way I can outfight these guys right now.

The Coalition cruiser attempted to contact the *Hawk*.

Jackson ignored the message. The Coalition vessel was too far away to stop him. He checked his coordinates quickly. The closest populated system was seven days away. Jackson laid in a course and jumped. He and Pain would have to go on half rations immediately. They'd make it to their next stop. They'd both be hungry and a bit slimmer, but they'd be alive, unlike the people aboard the *Massachusetts*. If the system wasn't free of Coalition forces, they would be forced to fight; they'd have no other choice.

Jackson wondered if perhaps he should have just taken on the cruiser. There was no telling what the Coalition might have at the next system. It was too late now to worry about it. He'd already picked up the dice and rolled double or nothing. In seven days he'd find out if he'd gotten a seven or boxcars.

Joseph Jackson looked over at Dan Pain seated behind the gunner's console. Pain had spent the last five days going through every simulation the computer had. To Jackson's eye, Pain was almost adequate. Still, anything was better than trying to use the computer's autofire program. He'd have no one to keep the guns functional with Pain at the gunner's console. But this was their best chance to survive if they ran into any action. They'd have about one minute to win a firefight and then the guns would go down. There was nothing for it, he had to work with what he had.

Jackson looked over the charts for the system that they were about to enter. The *Hawk* would be dropping out of FTL space between a Terran-class planet named Sevrans and an asteroid belt. Both the planet and the belt were extensively populated. This was a good thing. An asteroid belt gave Jackson a number of options that a planet just wouldn't. Ideally, Jackson wanted to sneak into the belt and find someplace to pick up some rations and then move on to Earth. Jackson braced himself and dropped the *Hawk* into real space.

He did a quick scan of the area. There was a Coalition destroyer circling Sevrans. Entirely too much firepower for the *Hawk* to even consider taking on with Pain at the guns. But there were two Coalition ships between the *Hawk* and the asteroid belt. Both were couriers, and fortunately they were several hundred thousand kilometers apart. Jackson started towards the nearest courier. His best bet would be to take on the first courier and then run into the belt and try to lose the second. He didn't expect his guns to be fully operational for a second encounter.

Pain began keying up the guns. "Not yet," Jackson said, "wait until I tell you to fire." He had no intention of letting Pain use up the guns before they were so close that he couldn't miss.

Jackson came at the courier as fast as the *Hawk* could travel. The courier began firing at them frantically. Jackson managed to stay clear and then he shouted, "Mr. Pain, open fire now."

The guns came to life and Jackson swung the *Hawk* hard to port and passed by the Coalition courier. The *Hawk* took one hit from the courier's lasers; fortunately the shields were able to absorb the entire force. Pain managed to hit the courier three times. It wouldn't be coming after them. The other courier, however, was turning to follow them into the belt.

"Dan, how did the weapons systems hold up?"

"Not well, sir. Two missile bays are still functional, but I fried all of the lasers."

"No help for that now. You got us past them, the rest is up to me. It might be a good idea for you to go see if any of the weapon systems are salvageable. We might still have to fight our way out of this." Jackson moved the ship towards the most crowded portion of the belt. Even here the asteroids were more than a kilometer apart from one another, but if he could move quickly enough he might be able to hide behind an asteroid and avoid detection from the Coalition ship. Since the

Blockade Runner

Hawk was almost certainly the faster ship, Jackson would run if that didn't work. He'd just try to get far enough ahead of the Coalition ship that he'd be able to stop for supplies if he could find a place to pick them up out here.

Twenty minutes later Jackson picked up a radio signal coming from one of the asteroids. He immediately made towards it. The *Hawk's* sensors showed him a run down mining operation. That anyone at all was subsisting from this settlement amazed Jackson.

"This is the Williams settlement, Earth ship, please identify yourself."

"Williams settlement, this is the E.F.S. *Hawk*. I'm Captain Joseph Jackson of the Earth Federation Navy. We are hoping to purchase food supplies from you."

"Captain Jackson, we have to ask you to leave. We are not willing to trade with an Earth Federation vessel at this time. We cannot deal with the reprisals that would surely come from the Coalition."

Jackson frowned. "I'm sorry to hear that; you see I don't have any other options. We must take on food, now. If you aren't willing to sell us food, I'm afraid I'm going to have to take it."

"Captain, we are in no position to fight you, we have children here."

"I'm sorry, I have to do what I have to do."

"How long can we have to discuss this among ourselves?"

"Three minutes," Jackson said.

"That's not very long."

"You're down to two minutes and fifty five seconds."

The connection broke. "Damn this," Jackson swore, "I don't want to open fire on these people." But what choice did he have. Was the welfare of this settlement more important than Earth's. But there were children here—at least there might be. Still Earth came first, there were definitely children there.

The communication channel came back to life two minutes later. "Captain. We can give you enough food for two people for about six weeks. But we would ask a favor from you."

"Go on."

"Do you see the leftmost shed, and the abandoned living bubble behind it?"

"Yes."

"Would you please open fire on them. We have to at least be able to show the Coalition that we were concerned for our lives."

Jackson smiled and opened fire on the requested targets. In less than ten seconds he had completely destroyed them both.

"How's that?"

"Quite impressive, sir."

"Now about the food."

"We'll have it out to you in a minute or two."

Three minutes later two men and a servo bot carrying food approached the vessel. Their vac suits were clearly old and patched. Dear God, Jackson thought, they must be right on the

edge. What will happen to them financially once the Coalition finds out they helped me.

Jackson went to the cargo hold and opened the iris valve and the two men stepped inside. Jackson moved over to the food and inspected it. While it didn't look like top of the line rations it did indeed seem to be what they had promised. Jackson made a decision, he stepped forward and handed The closet man a debit cube. Over his com channel Jackson said. "This is a debit cube for five hundred thousand units, it should cover more than the cost of the food and the property that we damaged. I hope it'll be enough to get you through any economic reprisals that the Coalition may bring against you."

The look of astonishment and hope that passed over the visored feature of the two men made Jackson feel better about taking the food.

Jackson knew that the food wasn't worth anything near five hundred thousand units, but the Coalition would be unforgiving to these people and Jackson didn't want that on his conscience. The cube represented the last of the money that the *Hawk* had for the trip. Seeing they were only one jump away from Earth, Jackson figured he could use all of it if he wanted to. If he made it back to Earth with the engine no one was going to question his decision to spend the government's money in this fashion. He'd be a hero and no one asked heroes embarrassing questions.

Jackson had figured that he had left the enemy at least an hour behind. He'd been wrong. When the *Hawk* lifted, a Coalition ship was almost on top of it. Jackson only just managed to avoid being hit when the Coalition ship opened fire. There weren't many pilots that could have saved the *Hawk* at this range, but Jackson was one of them. He put everything he had into his engine and sent Pain to minister to the lasers. "If you can get even one laser up and running, get back up here, because I want you on it."

Jackson engaged the computer's auto fire program and concentrated on getting his ship out of the vicinity. He had the faster ship, but at this range, with only missiles to work with, he didn't have many options. He told the computer to concentrate on targeting the Coalition's missiles. In its present state the *Hawk* was never going to take the other courier, no point in even trying. What he had to do was keep from being destroyed long enough to get to faster-than-light. That meant getting out of the asteroid belt and getting farther ahead of this ship. His com channels were going nuts, offers for surrender no doubt. He ignored them; surrender wasn't an option, and neither was failure. The auto fire proved competent enough to shoot at the incoming missiles and Jackson began to pull away from his pursuer. Unfortunately, the *Hawk* had seen a lot of action and its missiles were only going to hold out for about five more minutes. Still, that might be long enough for them to get to the asteroid belt's escape perimeter and jump out of the system. Just as Jackson was thinking of this it occurred to someone on the Coalition vessel to stop trying to hit the *Hawk* with their laser and start targeting the *Hawk's* missiles.

Absolute Magnitude

"Damn," Jackson swore, it didn't look like they were going to make it. He thought of Gwen and of never seeing her again. He'd known that that was a risk when he'd taken this assignment. But he'd always come through before, and it was so damned important. Given the chance to do it over again, he knew that he'd still take the assignment. His death meant nothing next to so many millions of others. He reconciled himself to that death, but refused to give up before it came.

Then Pain came rushing onto the bridge and took the seat behind the weapons console. "I got one of the lasers back up. I won't be able to go over sixty percent with it, but maybe that'll be enough."

"It'll have to be," Jackson said.

Jackson grimaced each time Pain missed his target, but it was beginning to look as if the laser might be enough to save the day. Jackson held his breath and kept flying. When the computer announced that they were far enough out of the asteroid belt's gravity well to go to faster-than-light Jackson expelled his breath and engaged the FTL drive.

The three months in FTL space were the longest three months that Jackson could remember. He and Pain had had to stretch six weeks worth of food out to twelve weeks, they were both considerably thinner than they had been at the start of the missions. The uncertainty of what was happening in real space ate away at him. Were they at war or was the Coalition only flexing its muscles? Damn it, but so much could happen in three months. The war could even be over by the time he reached Earth. They might arrive only to find Mother Earth defeated and garrisoned by Coalition troops. Jackson refused to allow himself to believe in that scenario. Earth would survive. It had to. The Coalition could not be allowed to be the only force in human government. It just couldn't.

Two hours before the *Hawk* was scheduled to return to real space, Jackson talked over the situation with Dan Pain. "Look, we've been out of the communications loop for three months. We have no way of knowing what the situation will be in the Sol System. Earth might already have fallen to the Coalition. If that's the case, we'll be able to see the signs of a takeover before the Coalition becomes aware of our entry. In the event that Earth has fallen, we leave the Sol System immediately and search out any resistance movements we can find."

Jackson could see fear in Pain's eyes. He was painting this pretty bleak, but he had to. They had to be prepared for the worst. "When we come out into real space, we'll be at red alert. We'll fire at any vessel that doesn't immediately identify itself as friendly. Any questions?"

Dan shook his head. "All right then, let's do it."

The last few minutes before real time entry ticked off. Jackson checked the status of each department. Everything was as it should be and the countdown commenced. "Sixty seconds to reentry," Jackson said. "Prepare for imminent reentry."

The *Hawk* dropped into real space prepared to defend itself. "There are no ships within immediate range, Captain," Pain said.

"Planetary communications are within normal ranges, and I can't detect anything suggesting large scale warfare and, Captain, we have communications coming in from Buenos Aires."

"Excellent," Jackson said, putting the transmission onto the holo over his computer. "Buenos Aires, this is Captain Joseph Jackson, of the E.F.S. *Hawk*."

A jubilant Admiral Fatimi appeared before Jackson a broad smile on his face. "You have no idea how pleased I am to see you, Joseph."

"You can't be any happier than I am."

"Quite a bit more so, I'm sure. The report that we received from Tristan was that you were lost along with the *Massachusetts*."

"No, sir, the *Massachusetts* covered our retreat."

Fatimi nodded sadly. "We lost a lot of valuable people getting you here, but you are here and that puts an entirely different spin on our position. Report directly to me the moment you touchdown."

"Yes, sir."

The Buenos Aires spaceport was the busiest on the planet, but the *Hawk* was cleared for touch down immediately. Twenty minutes later Jackson was in a comfortable chair in Fatimi's office with a cold drink in his hand. "How bad is it?" Jackson asked.

"Now that we have the new propulsion system, we're in a much stronger position than our most optimistic projections suggested."

"Oh?"

"Joseph, when we declared war on the Coalition two weeks ago, twenty-seven planets declared their independence. Since then nine more planets have come over to our side."

Jackson felt a huge sense of relief. "We still can't beat them, but by God we just might be able to force them to the table."

"Obviously, we'd rather get them to the table and get things cleared up immediately. Thirty-six planets added to our Federation is more than we ever hoped for, but our latest projections, taking into account the new propulsion systems, give us a twenty-two percent chance for a full military victory."

"Twenty-two percent? The last figures I saw gave us a only a twelve percent chance of forcing the Coalition to the bargaining table."

Fatimi smiled. "Not one of our earlier projections took into account Vallyho being free and aligned with us."

Jackson was stunned. "*Vallyho*?"

Fatimi nodded. "We ran into a serious streak of luck there. It seems that Tom Anderson had a force of mercenaries on the planet. We're not sure how he managed it, but he took control

Blockade Runner

of the *Avenger* shortly after we declared war. His force then managed to get control of Vallyho."

Jackson found himself laughing until tears were rolling down his face. "By god, Marty, we just might do it."

"Vallyho's the key to the entire situation. Our chance of victory goes up by five percent for each month that Vallyho holds."

"Then I imagine we've got damn near everything heading to relieve the planet."

"We do, but none of it will get there fast enough."

"You don't look like a man who's given up hope, so I assume you have a contingency plan."

Fatimi smiled. "Yes indeed, I do. As we speak, the prototype engine is being fitted into the E.F.S. *Storm*. The *Storm* can be at Vallyho in three days."

"Excellent."

"It's still a tall order. The Coalition has five battleship groups blockading the system. Vallyho has only three battleships up and running, and none of them have any escort to speak of. The Coalition could take the planet by force, but not without unacceptable damage to the shipyards. They've managed to hit Vallyho pretty hard with a nanovirus. The population has about a week before it'll be too decimated to fight back."

"It's come to that."

"I'm afraid so."

"Can we do anything about it?"

"If the *Storm* can get through the blockade. We know which nanovirus they've infected the planet with and we have an antinavovirus ready."

"How did we manage to figure that out? As I understand it, that was one of the biggest problems in the old day, finding a cure for a nanovirus."

"The guy who designed it didn't like what he was being forced to do, so he designed a cure at the same time. Then he made damned sure that he got the specs to the Earth Federation. Not everyone is willing to do whatever it takes to win. We've sent the specs to Vallyho, but they don't have the facilities to make the antibot, so we have to deliver it."

Jackson shook his head. "It still looks like we're back to the bad old days."

"For a time, at any rate. I expect we'll be seeing cyborg pilots before too much longer."

"When it gets to that point, you can count me out."

"You and me both, Joe. So let's try to win this one before it gets that far."

"Since we're at war, I'm assuming my days aboard the *Hawk* are over."

"That would be a safe bet. You're the best captain that I've got."

"So what's next for me?"

"That's up to you, Joe."

Jackson raised his eyebrows. "Up to me?"

"I'd like you to captain the *Storm*. But since the *Storm*'s mission is damn close to a suicide run, I won't order you to take command of it."

Jackson searched his old friend's face. "What are my chances of succeeding?"

"Of succeeding, about thirty percent. Of surviving the mission, about four percent."

"Why the discrepancy?"

"Because the *Storm* doesn't have to survive for the mission to be termed a success. The only parameter for success is that Vallyho receive the nanobots. Firing a missile accomplishes that. Hell, the entire ship is filled with the bots, you could slam into the planet and the mission would be a success."

"I see."

"Joe, with any other Captain all the percentages fall by twenty percent."

"But that means—"

"That unless you're the captain of the *Storm*, a lot of good people aren't going to come home."

"Okay, supposing I turn down the ship, what happens then?"

"What happens then is we give the ship to a younger man and you take over as Head of the Fleet."

"Head of the Fleet?"

"If I can't have my best officer in the most important position, then I'll have to settle for having him in the second most important position."

"Is it really that important?"

"If it weren't, I wouldn't be asking you to do this. If Vallyho can survive, not only can we force the Coalition into coming to the table, we can dictate the terms. Honestly, I know there are those who want us to do more than blacken the Coalition's eyes, but I'm not one of them. I think it's important that no one government has too much power. What I'd like is for us to go to the table as equals this time and get some real concessions out of them. Though, honestly, I wouldn't mind if Earth gained enough power and prestige to push the Coalition around a little. But in the end, I'll be happy with a more equitable split of our spheres of influence."

"You've convinced me, I'm your man. When will the *Storm* be ready to leave?"

"Twelve hours."

"Damn, that doesn't even give me time to see Gwen."

"Gwen was pretty shaken up when the *Hawk* was reported lost. She's been staying with me and Jim for the last couple of months. We didn't think she should be alone."

"Thanks, Marty, I appreciate it. I assume that you've told her I'm alive."

"Oh yes, it'll be a very happy Gwen that you find waiting for you."

"Until I tell her I've accepted command of the *Storm*."

"There is that."

As soon as Jackson walked through Marty's front door, Gwen was in his arms. Tears of joy streamed down her face.

Absolute Magnitude

"Joe, it's really you, you're really alive. I've been praying that this would all turn out to be a bad dream. Oh god, you're alive."

Jackson kissed away Gwen's tears. "I'm alive, love. I'm so sorry that you went through that. I can't even imagine what it must have been like."

"It was terrible, Joseph. But I'll be fine now, I've got my husband back, and I'm not letting him go again."

"Gwen, we need to talk about that."

Gwen's smile vanished. "Joe, you've been gone for months, don't tell me you're shipping out again."

"We're at war, love. What choice do I have?"

"You're Joseph Jackson, you've got choices. You could even resign your commission. You've got your forty years in. No one, I mean no one, will ever question what you've accomplished. Leave this war to younger men. You've done enough."

Jackson looked over at Fatimi. "I think we'll be finishing this conversation in the guest room."

"By all means."

Jackson lead Gwen into the room, shut the door, and put his arms around her. "Gwen, my love, I understand how you feel. I want to stay here with you. Believe me I do, but I'm the best combat officer the Earth Federation has. I don't think I have to tell you how important it is that we win this war. There hasn't been anything this big since the Nano Wars. If I don't ship out on the *Storm*, the chances are that this war will drag out and a lot of people who don't have to die, will. Gwen, I have to accept command of the *Storm*."

Gwen was the wife of a navy officer and she reacted to this news the way that Jackson expected her too. She dried her eyes and asked him how long he would be away.

"That's the hard part," he answered. "I have no way of knowing. I need to break the Coalition's blockade of Vallyho. The *Storm* will arrive at Vallyho in three days, but I don't know how long it will be stationed there. I could be home in a matter of weeks, or it could be months. That really depends on the way the war progresses. But we have a chance of winning this one."

"Then I only have one other question. How dangerous is it?"

"It's dangerous."

"How dangerous?"

"Marty tells me that the computers have me pegged as the only captain capable of coming out of it alive."

"Joseph, I asked you *how* dangerous."

"Okay, okay," he said quietly. "I'm looking at a four percent chance of surviving this one."

"Joe, Joe, I just got you back. I can't go through this again."

"I'm sorry, Gwen, I have to go. Remember, I only had a fifteen percent chance of coming home with the *Hawk*."

"I've already told myself that. And I won't be responsible for others going through what I've been through. If you're the only one who can bring this crew home alive then you do

have to go. I understand that, but I'll be waiting here for you to come home, and by god you *will* come home." There were tears in her eyes again.

"Lover, if it's within my power I will come home to you."

The time for words was over. The couple moved to the bed. The first time they made love it was with the passion and intensity of long-separated lovers. The second time was with the tenderness of a goodbye.

When Jackson stepped onto the bridge of the *Storm*, he was very impressed. It was the largest battleship that the Earth Federation possessed, and it was more than a match for any one Coalition battleship. Unfortunately, Earth had only one. Don't get too attached to it, Jackson told himself. She's not likely to live past her first engagement. Damn, but the ship was impressive.

The crew was entirely volunteer. Each member had agreed that the mission was more important than their individual lives and were ready to follow any order no matter the consequences. Jackson had been surprised to find Dan Pain's name on the roster. He'd asked what had made him decide to volunteer, and Pain had told him it was the only way he could live with himself after all of the people that had died to get them home. The launch went smoothly, and the new propulsion unit had them outside of the system's escape perimeter in an hour. Impressively fast. The transition to faster-than-light was the smoothest that Jackson had ever experienced. They required no FTL medicine. This was the way to travel. Jackson had only three days to get used to the ship before he'd have to engage the enemy with it. He tried not to waste a single minute of that time. He ran the ship through every simulation the computer had. The virtual reality program was amazing. Jackson was used to executing his own evasive maneuvers. The VR was good for getting information to him quickly, but he'd never been happy with the speed of any of the autoevade programs that he'd come into contact with. He was still quicker at recognizing the right evasive maneuver, but this program could execute the maneuver much more quickly than he could. That would make any confrontation much easier. He would be free to focus all of his attention on selecting the right evasive reaction and not have to worry about the actual mechanics of the action. This was the best ship in space. It was a damn shame that she would have to be so outnumbered by the enemy on her maiden voyage.

The thing that most impressed Jackson was the new stasis fields for the crew. He'd never had that kind of protection before. You could ram an enemy ship with out smearing the entire crew against one of the walls. Of course, the impact would still probably reduce you to ionized gas, but you wouldn't get turned into goo. It was a magnificent piece of work. And still, their chance of survival was only four percent.

Blockade Runner

Jackson looked around the bridge. He'd been aboard the *Storm* for almost three days now and the only person he knew by name was Dan. He just hadn't had the time to get to know his crew properly. Things were quiet at the moment, but that would change very soon. Just ten minutes to real space. Then he and the Coalition would find out just how good the *Storm* was.

Jackson turned on the com and addressed the entire ship. "As you all know, we have just under ten minutes until we enter real space. Our chances of surviving this engagement are very small. We will do everything we can to break the blockade and, of course, we will do all that we can to survive, but that may not be possible. What we are about to do today is the most important thing that any of us could ever have hoped to do. I am honored to be serving with a crew such as this. I thank you, and all of mankind thanks you, for the sacrifice that you are about to make. May god be with you." He thumbed off the com.

Dan leaned over to him. "That was nice, but it almost sounded like you aren't making any sacrifice yourself."

Jackson smiled. "But I get paid the big units for taking these kinds of risks."

"Joseph, you get paid the big units because you'll get us home alive."

"God, I hope so," he said, sliding his VR helmet on. The countdown commenced.

Jackson's screen was flooded with data when the *Storm* dropped into real space. Three of the Coalition's battle groups were waiting for them at the planet's escape perimeter. The other two were monitoring from much closer to Vallyho. The *Storm*'s weapons fired immediately. Jackson was pleased when they got several direct hits on the nearest ships. The Coalition had known they were coming, but they couldn't know the exact moment that they would drop into real space. That was the only real advantage the *Storm* had. The gap that suddenly opened in the Coalition's defensive scheme helped Jackson plot a course towards Vallyho. The Coalition vessels moved quickly to cut him off. Jackson pushed forward. He didn't have a choice. There was no way that they could get through this unscathed, but the path of least resistance might get them through it alive.

Jackson had known that his gunnery team would be good, but he'd never seen a team anywhere near as good as these guys were. As the *Storm* moved towards the Coalition battle group, ship after ship was racked with silent explosions. The gunners were concentrating on taking out the battleships' escort. From this distance Jackson didn't have a problem evading enemy fire. The fact that his gunners were striking targets at all amazed him.

The *Storm* was up against the *Wasp*, the *Gallant*, and the *Charger*, as well as what remained of their escorts. The gunners had ignored the more powerful ships, realizing that it was more important to diminish the enemy's overall numbers than it was to stop their more powerful ships. Jackson had

fewer vessels to take into account than he would have otherwise. The Coalition had more firepower available to them than they might have, but since there were fewer ships Jackson had a much better chance of avoiding that firepower.

The closer the *Storm* came to the enemy ships, the harder it was to stay clear of their fire. Jackson dropped straight down, attempting to leave all three behind. The *Wasp* followed while the *Gallant* and the *Charger* dropped back towards the system to try to cut off any angle that might allow the *Storm* to simply run past them and on to the planet. Jackson was satisfied with this. He still had to be aware of the *Gallant*'s and the *Charger*'s fire, but his gunners were free to engage only the *Wasp*. The ships were now close enough in for the gunners to use their missiles as well as their laser cannons. This made it harder to keep clear of the lasers, but Jackson had a lot of faith in the *Storm*. Several laser beams played against the *Wasp*'s shields, sending off waves of green light.

Jackson continued to drop and the distances between the *Wasp* and the *Storm* widened. When Jackson was satisfied with the distances between the ships he angled off toward the system. The ship reacted beautifully and only the *Wasp* was able to attack them effectively. Lasers fired and missiles launched. Jackson saw a direct hit on the *Wasp* that sent a portion of the ship spinning away into space. Then he felt the shudder of his own ship as they took a direct hit. Jackson didn't know what the immediate damage was, but the *Storm* had won free and was headed towards the system. The three Coalition battleships followed them in.

"Can someone give me a damage assessment?" Jackson asked tersely.

"No casualties, and only minor damage to missile bay three. I've got someone working on it already. But, Captain, we lost fifty percent of the nano missiles."

"Damn," Jackson swore. "Get the remaining missiles into another bay. Give me an assessment of enemy damages."

"The *Charger* was undamaged by our fire, but the *Wasp* took extensive damage. It's only following us at forty percent of its normal top speed."

That was something at least. Getting into the system had been the easy part. Now for the hard part: getting past the ships in system, while staying ahead of the ships following from behind. The two Coalition battle groups were moving in toward Vallyho. They'd seen the speeds the *Storm* was capable of and they weren't going to let Jackson get the angle he'd require to pass them by without a fight. Jackson allowed himself a tight smile. Maybe he wouldn't be able to surprise them with his speed again, but they were moving in towards Vallyho and that meant the Vallyho forces would be in on this. If there was enough action going on he just might be able to slip one of the nano-missiles past the Coalition forces. If he could do that then he'd be free to do whatever it took to bring his crew home alive.

"Captain, we have communications from the Coalition."

Absolute Magnitude

"Route it to my com."

A large man in a Coalition uniform with captain's bars appeared on Jackson's VR screen. "Earth Vessel, this is fleet captain Bunch. Please respond."

"Captain Bunch, this is Captain Joseph Jackson. What can I do for you?"

"You can damn well surrender, Jackson."

Before Jackson could respond an aid whispered in his ear.

"The three Vallyho battleships have appeared on screen."

"Not in this lifetime, Captain."

"Jackson, you're out manned and outgunned. Do you really want us to destroy your ship?"

"That's what you'll have to do to stop us. We're here to relieve the blockade or die in the attempt. I'd suggest tending to your defense, we're coming in." Jackson smiled and cut the channel.

"We've got a tight beam transmission from the Vallyho battleship *Avenger*, routing it to your com now."

The man who appeared on the holo looked to be well past retirement age. "Captain Jackson, I am Captain Timothy Edwards, and I can't tell you how pleased we are to see you."

"Thank you, Captain. As I'm sure you know, we're here to break the blockade. Any assistance you could give us would be greatly appreciated."

"We'll do what we can, Captain. We're not all as sharp as we could be, but we are three fully functional battleships. We should be able to do something. I look forward to speaking with you at great length once you're planetside."

"I look forward to it." Jackson broke the connection. This was going to get tough.

Jackson looked to his readouts. At their present speed it would take the *Storm* twenty minutes to get close enough to engage the Coalition ships, and there wasn't a damn thing he could do to increase his speed. During that time, Jackson watched as two Vallyho battle ships were lost, leaving only the *Avenger* defending the planet. For their part the Vallyho forces did manage to eliminate most of the escorting ships. Jackson actually felt a sense of relief when the *Storm* engaged the enemy.

Streams of data flowed across his screen and he reacted to them instinctively. If Jackson slowed down enough to actually analyze the data, the *Storm* was finished. Across the top of the screen ran the projected paths of laser fire, both enemy and friendly; below that blinked the coordinates of every missile that had been launched; and under that, damage assessments for each of the ships engaged in the conflict. Jackson struggled to get his ship through the maze of enemy fire. The damage was coming fast and furious and Jackson was really beginning to worry. At this rate, they weren't going to make it. He realized that it was time to start launching the missiles with the nanobots.

"It's time to start launching the bots."

"Understood."

As soon as the *Storm* launched a missile it was shot down. The Coalition clearly knew the score. This was not going to be easy. "Hold off on the nanobot missiles and start firing all of our normal missiles in sequence."

As Jackson had hoped, the Coalition devoted a large portion of their forces to hunting down all of the *Storm*'s missiles. This made it a lot easier for Jackson to push toward the planet, and the Coalition began to take heavier losses. When one of the Coalition battleships was racked with explosions Jackson began to hope. If they could just destroy the other Coalition battleship before the three behind them joined the battle, the *Storm* would have a clear path to the planet. It was not to be. The remaining Coalition battleship managed to get in front of the *Avenger* and kept itself between the planet and the Vallyho forces. The battleship continued engaging the *Avenger* and the *Storm* while its escort hunted down each and every missile that the *Storm* fired off. Despite numerous direct hits from both the *Storm* and the *Avenger*, the enemy vessel managed to hold its position just long enough for the rest of the Coalition forces to engage from behind.

New damage assessments began to reach Jackson. They were out of regular missiles. "Back to the nano missiles," he ordered.

The nanobot missiles began to flood out into space. The Coalition ships took no chances and fired on every one of them. Then the battleship between them and Vallyho exploded.

"That's it," Jackson shouted, "we've got a lane." The *Storm* plunged towards Vallyho. "How many nano missiles do we have left?"

"Three," came the reply.

Dear god, Jackson thought, this is going to be close. "Hold off firing them until my command."

"Yes sir."

Jackson threaded the *Storm* closer to Vallyho. The damage continued to mount, but as long as the damage didn't cripple the *Storm*, he ignored it. The remaining three missiles had to count. Then it happened. The *Storm* took a hit that made it almost impossible to steer. With his vector locked, Jackson had to fire the missiles. "Fire," he commanded.

The missiles came streaking out of their bays and headed towards the planet. Immediately, one exploded as it hit some debris left from a Coalition battleship, but the other two continued on towards Vallyho.

Jackson was about to announce mission success, when the two remaining missiles exploded in laser fire. That was the last of the missiles, now what? Jackson racked his brain. The mission was lost. He couldn't maneuver, and he had no nano missiles left.

"Standing by for orders, Captain." The hopeful voice was Pain's.

But what could Jackson order. There was nothing left to do, they'd fired off everything they had and they'd come up short. Jackson looked at Vallyho. The beautiful blue-green globe lay

Blockade Runner

directly in front of him, but it was impossibly far away now that they were out of missiles. If only he had one more missile. . . and then it hit him, he had exactly one more missile: the *Storm* was loaded with the nano bots. And it was on the correct vector to intersect with Vallyho. "Engineering, give me everything you've got, we're going in to Vallyho."

Jackson could hear the murmurs from his crew, but he didn't have a choice. He and his crew had known that they might have to forfeit their lives when they'd taken the mission. The *Storm* increased its speed and plunged towards Vallyho. Jackson kept up the speed and watched as the Coalition vessels fell behind. "Route all power to my com, now," Jackson ordered. If he was going to pull this off, he'd have to take over direct control of the ship's power. For the first and only time in his life, Jackson found himself wishing that he were a cyborg. He waited until he could wait no longer and then put the *Storm* into full reverse.

The *Storm* was in Vallyho's gravity well and from this position there was nothing that Jackson could do to get back out of the well. Even if he couldn't escape the planet, maybe he could slow the *Storm* down enough so that some of his crew might survive the impact. The makers of the stasis field were about to find out just how well their designs worked.

For the purpose of a successful mission the angle of entry made little difference, but if his crew was going to survive it made quite a bit of difference. Jackson needed the *Storm* to enter at precisely the right angle in order to give him some chance at crash landing the ship. Two or three degrees off in either direction and it didn't matter what he did, his crew would not be surviving. It took every bit of concentration that Jackson had to get his crippled ship to enter at the correct angle. He never heard his first mate declare mission success, he was too busy holding the ship on as steady a course as possible.

The entry was like nothing he'd ever experienced; he was moving too fast and the *Storm's* integrity was not what it should have been. Jackson could feel the atmosphere as it attempted to rip the *Storm* to shreds. He played the power from one thruster to another trying to keep the ship oriented correctly. If he lost control for even a moment the ship would disintegrate and no one would survive. The planet came up at him quickly and Jackson wished to hell he could slow the ship more than he'd been able to. His mind was still firmly calculating the *Storm's* trajectory and speed when the ship slammed into Vallyho. He felt the enormous concussion and then he knew nothing more.

At first there was only pain and a red haze, then light penetrated the haze and the sounds of hell found their way into Jackson's consciousness. He'd managed to land the ship, and obviously there had been survivors, though many of them seemed to be in a bad way. Jackson's own pains began to make themselves known. His ribs were almost certainly broken. He couldn't feel his legs—a broken back at

the very least and his legs might possibly have been amputated. Since the weight of the ship's wreckage kept him from moving, he had no way of knowing.

After what seemed an eternity the weight lifted and he heard intelligible words.

"We've found another intact section, major. I think it's the bridge crew."

"Any survivors?"

"Here," Jackson moaned. His was not the only voice to rise to the question. More had made it.

"It looks like most of the bridge crew made it!" he heard a jubilant voice say.

Jackson ignored his own pain and let tears roll down his face. He'd brought some of his crew home alive, that was all that mattered. Hands were lifting him from the wreckage.

"Major, we've found the Captain."

Jackson's eyes wouldn't focus. "How many . . . ?"

"How many?"

"My crew, how many made it."

"Maybe thirty percent," a voice answered.

"So few?"

"Captain, I'm amazed that any of you made it." The new voice was familiar.

"Anderson?"

"It's me, Joseph. You're going to make it."

Jackson smiled. "We've brought you relief. The ship was loaded with nanokillers."

"Thank you, Captain," the first voice said. "This injection should bring you some relief."

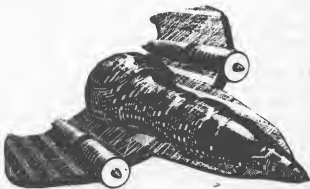
Blessed numbness spread through Jackson's body and he began to lose his hold on consciousness. "I can't feel my legs, how bad are they?"

It was Anderson who answered. "Joseph, you lost both of your legs, but you didn't lose that much blood, you *are* going to make it."

Jackson nodded. It was a small price to pay compared to what seventy percent of his crew had paid. "Tom, can you get word to my wife? She needs to know that I made it."

"Count on it."

"Thanks," Jackson said, and then darkness swallowed him up.



ABORT

SYSTEM SHUTDOWN

ENGINE OVER-HEAT

ENGINE OVER-HEAT

PHOTOGRAPH BY GUY AROCH

Changeling

Sharon Lee and Steve Miller

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The first thing they told him when he emerged from the catastrophic healing unit was that his wife had died in the accident.

The second thing they told him was that her Clan was pursuing retribution to the fullest extent of the Code.

They left him alone, then, the med techs, with instructions to eat and rest. The door slid closed behind them with the snap of a lock engaging.

Out of a habit of obedience, he walked over to the table and lifted the cover from the tray. The aroma of glys-blossom tea rose to greet him and he dropped the cover, tears rising.

He had not known his wife well, but she had been pretty and bold and full of fun—one found it inconceivable, newly healed from one's own injuries and with the scent of her preferred blend in the air, that she was—that she was—Dead.

The tears slipped over, blinding him. He raised his hands to cover his face and wept where he stood.

His name was Ren Zel dea'Judan, Clan Obrelt. He was twenty-one Standard years old and the hope of all his kin.

They were shopkeepers, Clan Obrelt. It scarcely mattered what sort of shop, as long as it wanted keeping. In the hundreds of years since the first dea'Judan took up the trade, Obrelt had kept flower shops, sweet shops, hardware shops, book shops, wine shops, green groceries and shops too odd to mention. The shops they kept were never their own, but belonged to other, wealthier, Clans who lacked Obrelt's genius for management.

Having found a trade that suited them, Obrelt was not minded to change. They settled down to the work with a will and achieved a certain reputation. Eventually, it came to be Obrelt managers that the High Clans sought to manage the stores the High Clans owned. In the way of commerce, the price that Obrelt might ask of Clans desirous of employing their shopkeepers rose. The House became—not wealthy, not in any Liaden terms—but comfortably well-off. Perhaps not nearly so well-off by the standard of the far homeworld, Liad itself; but comfortable enough by the easy measure of outworld Casia.

A Clan of shopkeepers, they married and begat more shopkeepers, though the occasional accountant, or librarian, or Healer was born. These changelings puzzled the Clan elders when they appeared, but honor and kin-duty were served and each was trained to that which he suited, to the increase and best advantage of the Clan.

Into Clan Obrelt, then, in the last relumma of the year called Mitra, a boychild was born. He was called Ren Zel, after the grandfather who had first taken employ in a shop and thus found the Clan its destiny, and he was a normal enough

child of the House, at first, second and third counting.

He was quick with his numbers, which pleased Aunt Chane, and had a tidy, quiet way about him, which Uncle Arn Eld noted and approved. No relative was fond enough to proclaim him a beauty, though all allowed him to be neatly made and of good countenance. His hair and eyes were brown; his skin a rich, unblemished gold.

As befit a House in comfortable circumstance, Obrelt was wealthy in children. Ren Zel, quiet and tidy, was invisible amid the gaggle of his cousins. His three elder sisters remembered, sometimes, to pet him, or to scold him, or to tease him. When they noticed him at all, the adults found him respectful, current in his studies, and demure—everything that one might expect and value in the child of a shopkeeper who was destined, himself, one day to keep shop.

It was Aunt Chane who first suspected, in the relumma he turned twelve, that Ren Zel was perhaps destined to be something other than a shopkeeper. It was she who gained the Delm's permission to take him down to Pilot's Hall in Casiaport. There, he sat with his hands demurely folded while a lady not of his Clan tossed calculations at him, desiring him merely to give the answer that came into his head.

That was a little frightening at first, for Aunt Charie had taught him to always check his numbers on the computer, no matter how certain he was, and he didn't like to be wrong in front of a stranger and perhaps bring shame to his House. The lady's first calculations were easy, though, and he answered nearly without thinking. The quicker he answered, the quicker the lady threw the next question, until Ren Zel was tipped forward in his chair, face animated, brown eyes blazing in way that had nothing tidy or quiet about it. He was disappointed when the lady held up her hand to show she had no more questions to ask.

Also that day, he played catch with a very odd ball that never quite would travel where one threw it—at least, it didn't the first few times Ren Zel tried. On his fourth try, he suddenly understood that this was only another iteration of the calculations the lady had tossed at him, and after that the ball went where he meant it to go.

After the ball, he was asked to answer timed questions at the computer, then he was taken back to his aunt.

She looked down at him and there was something . . . odd about her eyes, which made him think that perhaps he should have asked the lady's grace to check his numbers, after all.

"Did I do well, Aunt?" he blurted, and Aunt Chane sighed.

"Well?" she repeated, reaching to take his hand and turning toward the door. "It's the Delm who will decide that for us, youngling."

Obrelt Himself, informed in private of the outcome of the tests, was frankly appalled.

Absolute Magnitude

"Pilot? Are they certain?"

"Not only certain, but—enthusiastic," Chane replied. "The Master Pilot allows me to know that our Ren Zel is more than a step out of the common way, in her experience of pilot-candidates."

"Pilot," the Delm moaned and went over to the table to pour himself a second glass of wine. "Obrelt has never bred a pilot."

Chane pointed out, dryly, that it appeared they had, in this instance, bred what might be trained into a very fine pilot, indeed. To the eventual increase of the Clan.

That caught Obrelt's ear, as she had known it would, and he brightened briefly, then moved a hand in negation. "All very well to say the *eventual* increase! In the near while, have you any notion how much it costs to train a pilot?"

As it happened, Chane did, having taken care to possess herself of information she knew would lie near to Obrelt's concern.

"Twenty-four cantra, over the course of four years, apprentice fees for two years more, plus licensing fees."

Obrelt gazed at her. "You say that so calmly. Tell me, sister, shall I beggar the Clan to educate one child? I allow him to be extraordinary, as he has managed to become your favorite, though we have prettier, livelier children among us."

"None of whom is Ren Zel," Chane returned tartly. She sighed then and grudgingly showed her lead card. "A first class pilot may easily earn eight cantra the Standard, on contract."

Obrelt choked on his wine.

"They say the boy will achieve first class?" he managed a few moments later, his voice breathless and thin.

"They say it is *not impossible* for the boy to achieve first class," she replied. "However, even a second class pilot may earn five cantra the Standard."

"May," repeated Obrelt.

"If he brings the Clan four cantra the Standard, he will pay back his education right speedily," Chane said. Observing that her brother wavered, she played her trump.

"The Pilot's Guild will loan us his first two years' tuition and fees, interest-free, until he begins to earn wages. If he achieves first class, they will write paid to the loan."

Obrelt blinked. "As desirous of the child as that?"

"He is," Chane repeated patiently, "more than a step out of the common way. Master Pilot von'Eyr holds herself at your pleasure, should you have questions for her."

"Hah. So I may." He walked over to the window and stood looking down into the modest garden, hands folded behind his back. Chane went to the table, poured herself a glass of wine and sipped it, recruiting herself to patience.

Eventually, Obrelt turned away from the window and came forward to face her.

"It is a strange path we would set the child upon, sister, to a place where none of his age-mates may follow. He will sail between stars while his cousins inventory stock in back

storerooms. I ask you, for you have given him his own room in your heart: Do we serve him ill or well by making him a stranger to his kin?"

And that was the question that needed to be asked, when all considerations of cantra-costs were ended. What was best done for Ren Zel himself, for the good of all the Clan?

Chane set her glass aside and met her Delm's eyes straightly.

"He is already a stranger among us," she said, speaking as truly as she knew how. "Among his age-mates he is a cipher—he is liked, perhaps, but largely ignored. He goes his own way, quiet, tidy, courteous—and invisible. Today—today, when the pilots returned him to me, it was as if I beheld an entirely different child. His cheeks glowed, his eyes sparkled, he walked at the side of the Master Pilot visible and proud." She took a breath, sighed it out.

"Brother, this boy is not a shopkeeper. Best for us all that we give him the stars."

And so it was decided.

Ren Zel achieved his first class piloting license on the nineteenth anniversary of his Name Day. He was young for the rank, especially for one who had not sprung from a piloting House, but not precocious.

Having thus canceled out half of his tuition and fees, he set himself to paying off the balance as quickly as possible. It had been plain to him for several years that the Clan had gone to extraordinary expense on his behalf and he did not wish his cousins to be burdened by a debt that rightly belonged only to himself. That being so, he had the Guild accountant write a contract transferring the amount owed from Clan Obrelt to Ren Zel dea'Judan Clan Obrelt, as a personal debt.

He was young, but he had a reputation among the elder pilots with whom he'd flown for being both steady and level-headed, a reputation they were glad to broadcast on the Port.

That being so, contracts came his way—good contracts, with pay-outs in the top percentage of the Guild's rates. Often enough, there was a bonus, for Ren Zel had a wizard's touch with a coörd string—or so his elders praised him. Those same elders urged him to go for Master, and he thought he would, someday.

After he cleared his debt.

It was night-port at Casia by the time he finished shut-down and gave the ship into the keeping of the client's agent. Ren Zel slung his kit over a shoulder and descended the ramp, filling his lungs with free air. World air tasted different than ship air, though he would have been hard put to say which flavor he preferred, beyond observing that, of world-air, he found Casia's the sweetest.

At the bottom of the ramp, he turned right and walked leisurely through the night-yard, then out into the thoroughfare of Main Port.

Changeling

The job he had just completed had been profitable—an exhilarating run, in fact, with the entire fee paid up front and a generous bonus at the far end. A half-dozen more like it would retire his debt. Not that such runs were common.

Night-port was tolerably busy. He saw a pilot he knew and raised a hand in greeting. The other waved and cut across the crowded walkway.

"Ren Zel! I haven't seen you in an age! There's a lot of us down Findoir's—come and share a glass or two!"

He smiled, but moved his hand in a gesture of regret. "I'm just in. Haven't been to Guild Hall yet."

"Well, there's a must," the other allowed cheerfully. "Come after you've checked in, do, for I tell you we mean to make a rare night of it. Otaria's gotten her first."

"No, has she? Give her my compliments."

"Come down after you've checked in and give them to her yourself," his friend said, laying a hand briefly on his sleeve. "Until soon, Ren Zel."

"Until soon, Lai Tor."

Warmed, he continued on his way and not many minutes later walked up the stairs into Casiaport Guild Hall.

The night clerk took his license, scanned it and slid it back across the counter. "Welcome home, Pilot." She tapped keys, frowning down at her readout. Ren Zel put his card away and waited while she accessed his file.

"Two deposits have been made to your account," she said, scrolling down. "One has cleared, and twelve percent Clan share has been paid. Eleven-twelfths of the balance remaining has gone against the Pilots Guild Tuition Account, per standing orders. No contracts pending . . ." She paused, then glanced up. "I have a letter for you, Pilot. One moment." She left the console and walked to the back.

Ren Zel frowned. A letter? A *paper* letter? Who would—

The clerk was back, holding a buff colored envelope. She used her chin to point at the palm reader set into the surface of the counter.

"Verification, please, Pilot."

Obediently, he put his palm over the reader, felt the slight tingle, heard the beep. He lifted his hand and the clerk handed him the envelope. His fingers found the seal embossed on the sealed flap—Obrelt's sign.

Ren Zel inclined his head to the clerk.

"My thanks."

"Well enough," she replied and looked once more her screen. "Status?"

He paused on the edge of telling her "on-call," feeling the envelope absurdly heavy in his hand.

"Unavailable," he said, fingers moving over the seal.

She struck a last key and inclined her head.

"So recorded."

"My thanks," he said again and, shouldering his kit, walked across the hall to the common room.

As luck would have it, the parlor was empty. He closed the door behind him, dropped his kit and slid his finger under the seal.

A letter from Obrelt? His hands were not quite steady as he unfolded the single sheet of paper. Paper letters had weight, and were not dispatched for pleasantries.

Has someone died? he wondered, and hoped that it might not be Chane, or Arn Eld or—

The note was brief, written in Obrelt's Own Hand.

Ren Zel dea'Judan was required at his Clan house, immediately upon receipt of this letter.

His Delm judged it time for him to wed.

It was morning when the taxi pulled up before Obrelt's house. Ren Zel paid the fare, then stood on the walkway until the cab drove away.

He had not come quite "immediately," there being no reason to rouse the House at midnight when so many were required to rise early and open the various shops under Obrelt's care. And he was himself the better for a shower, a nap and a change of clothes, though it was still not easy to consider the reason he had been summoned home.

Home.

Ren Zel turned and looked up the walk, to the fence and the gate and the tall town house beyond them. He had grown up in this House, among the noisy gaggle of his sibs and cousins; it was to this House that he had returned on his brief holidays from school. Granted, he had come back less often after he had finished with his lessons, but there had been flight time to acquire, techniques to master and the first class to win.

Once he held first class, of course, there had been contracts to fulfill, the debt to reduce. Between contracts, he had routinely kept his status on "on call," which required him to lodge at the Guildhall. The debt shrunk, but so, too, did his contact with his family.

He looked at the gate, and took a deep breath, steeling himself as if for some dreaded ordeal. Which was nonsense. Beyond the gate were only his kin—his Clan, which existed to shelter him and to care for him and to shield him from harm.

He took a step up the walkway.

The gate in the wall surrounding Obrelt's house sprung open and a woman emerged from the fastness beyond, walking briskly in her neat, shopkeeper's uniform and her sensible boots, a manager's clipboard cuddled against her breast.

She saw him and checked, eyes widening for the leather-jacketed stranger on Obrelt's very walk. Ren Zel held out his hands, palms showing empty.

"Eba," he said softly to his next eldest sister, "it is I."

"Ren Zel?" Her gaze moved over his face, finding enough of Obrelt there to soothe her into a smile and a step forward, hand extended. "Brother, I scarcely knew you!"

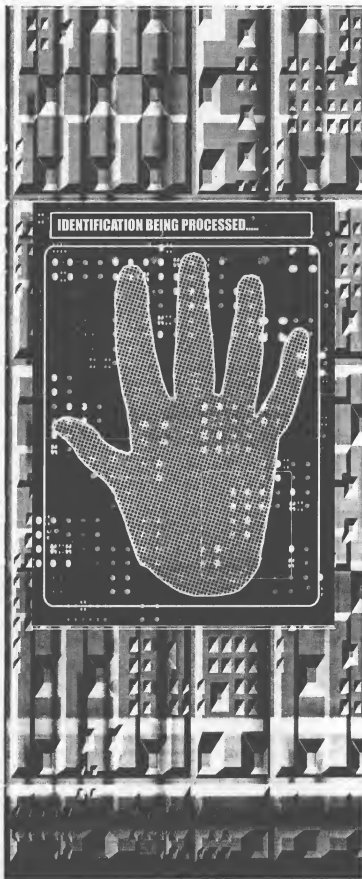
He smiled in his turn and went to take her hand.

"The jacket disarmed you, doubtless."

She laughed, kin-warm. "Doubtless. Jump-pilot, eh? It suits you extremely."

Eba had been his favorite sister—young enough not to entirely despise the childish projects of a younger brother, yet

Absolute Magnitude



old enough to stand as sometimes ally against the more bisterous of the cousins. Ren Zel pressed her fingers.

"I find you well?"

"Well," she conceded, and then, playfully, "And well you find me at all, rogue! How many relumma have passed since you last came to us? I suppose it's nothing to you that I am tomorrow sent to Morjan for a twelve-day? I was to have left today, but necessity calls me to the shop. Say at least you will be at Prime!"

"I believe I shall," he said. "The Delm calls me home, on business."

"Ah!" She looked wise. "One had heard something of that. You will be pleased, I think." She dropped his hand and patted the leather sleeve of his jacket. "Go on inside. I must to the shop."

"Yes, of course." She read his hesitation, though, and laughed softly, shaking her glossy dark hair back.

"You cannot stand out on the walk all day, you know! Until Prime, Ren Zel!"

"Until Prime, Eba," he replied, and watched her down the walk. She turned at the corner without looking back. Ren Zel squared his shoulders, walked up to the gate and lay his palm against the plate.

A heartbeat later, he was within Obrelt's walls. Directly thereafter, the front door accepted his palmtree and he stepped into the house.

His nose led him to the dining room, and he stood on the threshold several minutes before one of the cousins caught sight of him, touched the arm of the cousin next to him, who turned, then spoke quickly—quietly—to the cousin next to *her* until in no time the whole busy, bustling room was still, all eyes on the man under the archway.

"Well." One stirred, stood up from her place at the table.

"Don't dawdle in the doorway, child," said Aunt Chane, for all the stars as if he were ten again. "Come in and break your fast."

"Yes, Aunt," he said meekly and walked forward. The cousins shook themselves, took up the threads of their conversations, poured tea and chose slices of sweet toast. Ren Zel came to the table and made his bow.

"Ma'am."

"Ren Zel." She held out a hand, beckoning, and he stepped to her side. Chane smiled, then, and kissed his cheek. "Welcome home."

Aunt Chane sat on the short side of the table across which Ren Zel and Obrelt Himself faced each other, in the Advocate's Chair. The wine was poured and the ritual sip taken; then the glasses were set aside and Obrelt laid the thing out.

"The name of the lady we propose for your wife is Elsu Meriandra, Clan Jabun," he said, in his usual bluff way.

Changeling

Ren Zel blinked, for Jabun was a Clan old in piloting. Certainly, it was not Korval, but for outworld Casia it was very well indeed—and entirely above Obrelt's touch.

The Delm held up a hand. "Yes, they are beyond us absolutely—pilots to shopkeepers. But Obrelt has a pilot of its own to bring to the contract suite and Jabun was not uninterested."

But surely, Ren Zel thought, surely, the only way in which Obrelt might afford such a contract was to cede the child to Jabun—and that made no sense at all. Jabun was a Clan of pilots, allied with other of the piloting Houses. What use had they for the seed of a child of Obrelt, bred of shopkeepers, the sole pilot produced by the House in all its history? He was a fluke, a changeling; no true-breeding piloting stock such as they might wish to align with themselves.

"The child of the contract," his Delm continued, "will come to Obrelt."

Well, yes, and *that* made sense, if Obrelt found pilot wages to its taste and wished to diversify its children. But, gods, the expense! No guarantee that his child would be any more pilot than Eba!

"No," Aunt Chane said dryly, "we have not run mad. Recruit yourself, child."

Ren Zel took a deep breath. "One wishes not to put the Clan into shadow," he said softly.

"We have been made to understand this," Obrelt said, of equal dryness with his sister. "Imagine my astonishment when I learned that a debt contracted by the House for the good of the House had been reassigned to one Ren Zel dea' Judan Clan Obrelt. At his request, of course."

"My contracts are profitable," Ren Zel murmured. "There was no need for the House to bear the burden."

"The Clan receives a tithe of your wages," Aunt Chane pointed out.

He inclined his head. "Of course."

He looked up in time to see his Aunt and his Delm exchange a look undecipherable to him. The Delm cleared his throat.

"Very well. For the matter at hand—Jabun and I have reached an equitable understanding. Jabun desires his daughter to meet you before the lines are signed. That meeting is arranged for tomorrow evening, at the house of Jabun. The lines will be signed on the day after, here in our own house. The contract suite stands ready to receive you."

The day after tomorrow? Ren Zel thought, feeling his stomach clench as it did when he faced an especially tricky bit of piloting. Precisely as if he were sitting board, he took a breath and forced himself to relax. Of course, he would do as his Delm instructed him—obedience to the Delm, subservience to the greater good of the Clan, was bred deep in his bones. To defy the Delm was to endanger the Clan, and without the Clan there was no life. It was only—the matter came about so quickly . . .

"There was a need for haste," Aunt Chane said, for the second time apparently reading his mind. "Pilot Meriandra's

ship is come into dock for rebuilding and she is at liberty to marry. It amuses Jabun to expand his alliances—and it profits Obrelt to gain for itself the child of two pilots." She paused. "Put yourself at ease; the price is not beyond us."

"Yes, Aunt," he said, for there was nothing else to say. Two days hence, he would be wed; his child to come into Clan, to be sheltered and shaped by those who held his interests next to their hearts. The Code taught that this was well, and fitting, and just. He had no complaint and ought, indeed, feel honored, that the Clan lavished so much care on him.

But his stomach was still uncertain when they released him at last to settle his business at the Port and to register his upcoming marriage with the Guild.

The lines were signed, the contract sealed. Elsu Meriandra received her Delm's kiss and obediently allowed her hand to be placed into the hand of Delm Obrelt.

"Behold, the treasure of our Clan," Jabun intoned, while all of Clan Obrelt stood witness. "Keep her safe and return her well to us, at contract's end."

"Willingly we receive Elsu, the treasure of Jabun," Obrelt responded. "Our House stands vigilant for her, as if for one of our own."

"It is well," Jabun replied, and bowed to his daughter. "Rest easy, my child, in the House of our ally."

The cousins came forward then to make their bows. Ren Zel stood at the side of his contract-bride and made her known to each, from Obrelt Himself down to the youngest child in the nursery—his sister Eba's newest.

After that, there was the meal of welcoming. Ren Zel, who held lesser rank in Obrelt than his wife held in Jabun, was seated considerably down-table. This was according to Code, which taught that the Obrelt could not impose Ren Zel's status on Elsu, who was accustomed to sitting high; nor could her status elevate him, since she was a guest in his House.

He had eaten but lightly of the meal, listening to the cousins on either side talk shop. From time to time he glimpsed his wife, high up-table between his sister Farin and his cousin Wil Bar, fulfilling her conversational duty to her meal partners. She did not look down-table.

The meal at last over, Ren Zel and Aunt Chane escorted Jabun's treasure throughout Obrelt's house, showing her the music room, the formal parlor and the tea room, the game room and the door to the back garden. In the library, Aunt Chane had her place a palm against the recording plate. This registered her with the House computer and insured that the doors allowed to contract-spouses would open at her touch.

Departing the library, they turned left down the hall, not right toward the main stair, and Aunt Chane led the way up the private stairway to the closed wing. In the upper hallway, she paused by the first door and bowed to Elsu Meriandra.

"Your room, contract-daughter. If you find aught awry, only pick up the house phone and call me. It will be my honor to repair any error."

Elsu bowed in turn.

Absolute Magnitude

"The House shows me great kindness," she said, most properly, her high, sweet voice solemn. She straightened and put her hand against the plate. The door slid open and she was gone, though Ren Zel thought she looked at him, a flickering glance through modestly lowered lashes, in the instant before the door closed behind her.

Though it was not necessary, Aunt Chane guided him to the third and last door on the hallway. She turned and smiled.

"Temporary quarters."

This sort of levity was not like his Aunt and Ren Zel was startled into a smile of his own. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Thank us, is it?" She tipped her head, considering him in the hall's dim light. "Let the flowers aid you," she said softly. "It will be well, child."

He had his doubts, in no way alleviated by the few words he had actually exchanged with his wife, but it would serve no useful purpose to share them with Aunt Chane. The Clan desired a child born of the union of pilots: His part was plainly writ.

So, he smiled again and raised her hand, laying his cheek against the backs of her fingers in a gesture of kin-love. "It will be well," he repeated, for her comfort.

"Ah." She seemed on the edge of saying something further, but in the end simply inclined her head before walking, alone, back the way they had come.

After a moment, Ren Zel put his hand against the door and entered his temporary quarters.

He had been here yesterday, moving in his clothes and such of his books as he thought would be prudent. He had even opened the inner door and gone into the middle room—into the contract room itself—walking lightly on the lush carpet.

The bed was ornate, old, and piled high with pillows. The flowers twined up two bedposts and climbed across the connecting bars, spilling down in luxuriant curtains of green and blue. Sunlight poured down from the overhead window, heating the blossoms and releasing the aphrodisiac scent. Standing by the wine-table, Ren Zel had felt his blood stir and took a step away, deliberately turning his back on the bed.

The rest of the room was furnished but sparsely: there was the wine-table, of course, and a small table with two chairs, at which two might take a private meal; and a wide, yellow brocade sofa facing a fireplace where sweet logs were laid, awaiting the touch of a flamestick. The solitary window was that above the bed; the walls were covered in nubbled silk the color of the brocade sofa.

Across the room—directly across the room from the door by which he had entered—was another door. Beyond, he knew, was another room, like the room he had just quit, where his sisters were laying out those things Elsu Meriandra had sent ahead.

Some trick of the rising heat had filled his nostrils with flower-scent again and Ren Zel had retreated to his own quarters, locking the door to the contract-room behind him.

Now, showered and dressed in the robe his sisters had given him in celebration of his marriage, he paused to consider what little he knew of his wife.

She was his elder by nearly three Standards, fair-haired, wide-eyed and comely. He thought that she was, perhaps, a little spoilt, and he supposed that came of being the true-daughter of a High Clan Delm. Her manners were not entirely up in the boughs, however, and she spoke to Aunt Chane precisely as she ought. If she had little to say to him beyond those things that the Code demanded, it was scarcely surprising. He was in all things her inferior: rank, flight-time, age, and beauty. And, truth be told, they had not been brought together to converse.

That which had brought them together—well. He had taken himself to the sleep learner, to review the relevant section of Code, for the contract-bed was a far different thing than a breakshift tumble with a comrade—and there his wife had the advantage of him again. She had been married once already, to a pilot near her equal her rank, and Jabun had her child in its keeping.

Sighing, he straightened his garment about him, catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror: Ordinary, practical Ren Zel, got up in a magnificent indigo-and-silver marriage robe that quite overwhelmed his commonplace features. Sighing again, he glanced at the clock on the dresser.

The hour was upon him.

Squaring his shoulders under their burden of embroidery, Ren Zel went to the inner door, and lay his palm against the plate. The door opened.

Elsu Meriandra was at the wine table, back to him. Her hair was loose on her shoulders, her robe an expensive simplicity of flowing golden shadow-silk, through which he could plainly see her body. She heard the door open and turned, her eyes wide, lustrous with the spell of the bed-flowers.

"Good evening," she said, her high voice sounding somewhat breathless. "Will you drink a glass with me... Ren Zel?"

His name. A good sign, that. Ren Zel took a breath, tasting the flowers, and deliberately drew the scent deep into his lungs. He smiled at the woman before him.

"I will be happy to share a glass with you, Elsu," he said softly, and stepped into the contract-room.

Ren Zel woke in the room he had been allotted, and stretched, luxuriating in his solitude even as he cataloged his various aches. The lady was not a gentle lover. He thought he could have borne this circumstance with more equanimity, had he any indication that her exuberance sprang from an enthusiasm for himself. To the contrary, she had brushed his attentions aside, as one might dismiss the annoying graspings of a child.

Well, he thought ruefully, he had heard that the flower did sometimes produce... unwarranted... effects.

Changeling

So thinking, he rolled neatly out of bed, showered, and dressed in his usual plain shirt and pants. He stamped into his boots and picked up his latest book—a slender volume of Terran poetry. The habit of taking a book with him to breakfast had formed when he was a child and it had come to his notice that the cousins let him be, if he were diligently reading.

He was passing the game room on his way to the dining hall when the sound of child's laughter gave him pause.

It was not entirely . . . comfortable . . . laughter, he thought. Rather, it sounded breathless, and just a little shrill. Ren Zel put his hand against the door and, quietly, looked inside.

Elsu Meriandra was playing catch with young Son Dor, who had, Ren Zel remembered, all of eight Standards. She was pitching the ball sharply and in unexpected directions, exactly as one might do when playing with a pilot—or one destined to be a pilot.

Son Dor was giving a good accounting of himself, considering that he was neither a pilot nor the child of a pilot. But he was clearly at the limit of both his speed and his skill, chest heaving and face wet with exertion. As Ren Zel watched, he dove for the ball, reacting to its motion, rather than anticipating its probable course, actually got a hand on it and cradled it against his chest.

He threw it, none too steadily, back to Elsu Meriandra, who fielded the toss smoothly.

"That was a good effort," she said, as Ren Zel drifted into the room, meaning to speak to her, to offer her a tour of the garden and thus allow Son Dor to escape with his melant'i intact.

"Try this one," Elsu said and Ren Zel saw her hands move in the familiar sequence, giving the ball both velocity and spin.

Dropping his book, he leapt, extended an arm and snagged the thing at the height of its arc. He danced in a circle, the sphere spinning in a blur from hand to hand, force declining, momentum slowing, until it was only a ball again—a toy, and nothing likely to break a child's fragile fingers, extended in a misguided attempt to catch it.

"Cousin Ren Zel!" Son Dor cried. "I could have caught it! I could have!"

Ren Zel laughed and danced a few more steps, the ball spinning lazily now on the tips of his fingers.

"Of course you could have, sweeting," he said, easily. "But you were having so much fun, it was more than I could do not to join in." He smiled, the ball spinning slowly. "Catch now," he said to Son Dor, and allowed the toy to leave his fingers.

The child rushed forward and caught it with both hands.

"Well done!" Ren Zel applauded. Son Dor flushed with pleasure and tossed the ball back. Ren Zel caught it one-handed, and allowed his gaze to fall upon the wall clock.

"Cousin," he said, looking back to the child, "is it not time for history lessons?"

Son Dor spun, stared at the clock, gasped, and spun back, remembering almost at once to make his bow.

"Ma'am, forgive me. I am wanted at my studies."

"Certainly," Elsu said. "Perhaps we might play ball again, when your studies free you."

Son Dor looked just a bit uneasy about that, but replied courteously. "It would be my pleasure, ma'am." He glanced aside.

"Cousin . . ."

Ren Zel waved a hand. "Yes, all you like, but do not, I implore you, be late to Uncle Arn Eld. You know how he grumbles when one is late!"

Apparently Son Dor knew just that, and the knowledge gave his feet wings. The door thumped closed behind him and Ren Zel let out his breath in a long sigh before turning to face Elsu Meriandra.

She was standing with her head tipped, an expression of amused curiosity upon her face.

"He is not," Ren Zel said, stringently even, "a pilot. He will never be a pilot."

She frowned slightly at that and motioned for the ball. He threw it to her underhanded and she brought it, spinning hard, up onto her fingers.

"Are you certain of that, I wonder?"

Sometimes, when they are young, they are a little lazy. When that is the case, the spinball may be depended upon to produce the correct response."

Ren Zel moved his shoulders, letting the tension flow out of him. She did not understand—how could she? Pilot from a House of pilots. He sighed.

"The children of this House are shopkeepers. They have the reactions and the instincts of shopkeepers." He paused, thinking of Son Dor, laboring after a toss that a pilot's child would find laughably easy.

"He was striving not to disappoint," he told Elsu Meriandra. "What you see as 'a little lazy' is Son Dor's best reaction time. The spinball—forgive me—damage might well have been done."

Her face blanked. She caught the ball with a snap and bowed, unexpectedly low. "It was not my intention to endanger a child of the House."

She straightened and looked at him out of the sides of her eyes. "One was told, of course, but it is difficult to recall that this is not a House of pilots. Especially when there is yourself! Why, one can hardly hold a conversation in Guild Hall without hearing of your accomplishments!" She bowed again, more lightly this time. "You do our Guild great honor."

She did not wait for his reply, but turned and crossed the room to put the ball away. After a moment, Ren Zel went to pick up his fallen book.

"What have you?" she asked from just behind him. He turned and showed her the cover.

She frowned at the outlandish lettering. "That is Terran, is it not?"



Absolute Magnitude

"Indeed. *Duet for the Star Routes* is the title. Poetry."

"You read Terran?" She seemed somewhat nonplused by this information.

"I read Terran—a little. I am reading poetry to sharpen my comprehension, since I find it a language strong in metaphor."

Elsu moved her gaze from the book to his face. "You *speak* Terran."

That was not a question, but he answered it anyway. "Not very well, I fear. I meet so few to practice against that my skill is very basic."

"Why," she asked, the frown back between her eyes, "would you wish to learn these things?"

Ren Zel blinked. "Well, I am a pilot. My craft takes me to many ports, some of them Terran. I was . . . dismayed . . . not to be able to converse with my fellows on those ports and so I began to study." He paused. "Do you not speak Terran?"

"I do not," she returned sharply. "I speak Trade, which is sufficient, if I am impelled into conversation with—someone who is not able to speak the High Tongue."

"I see," Ren Zel murmured, wondering how to extricate himself from a conversation that was growing rapidly unpleasant for them both. Before he arrived at a solution, however, the lady changed the subject herself.

"Come, we are both pilots—one of us at least legendary in skill!" she said gaily.

"What do you say we shake the House dust from our feet and fly?"

It sounded a good plan, he owned; for he was weary of being House-bound already. There was, however, one difficulty.

"I regret," he said, his voice sounding stiff in his own ears. "Obrelt does not keep a ship. One is a pilot-for-hire."

"As I am," she said brightly. "But do not repine, if you haven't your own ship. I own one and will gladly have you sit second board."

Well, and that was generous enough, Ren Zel thought. Indeed, the more he thought about it, the better the scheme appeared. They were, as she said, both pilots. Perhaps they might win through to friendship, if they sat board together. Only look at what had lain between himself and Lai Tor—and see what comrades they had become, after shared flight had made their minds known to each other.

So—"You are generous," he told Elsu Meriandra. "It would be pleasant to stretch one's wings."

"Good. Let me get my jacket. I will meet you in the front hall."

"Well enough," he said. "I will inform the House."

Zel thought, eyeing its lines as he followed his contract-wife toward the ramp, do well in atmospheric flight. The back-swept wings and needle-nose gave it an eerie resemblance to the raptors that lived in the eaves of the Port Tower, preying on lesser birds and mice.

"There," Elsu used her key and the ship's door slid open. She stepped inside and turned to make him an exaggerated bow, her blue eyes shining.

"Pilot, be welcome on my ship."

He bowed honor to the owner and stepped into the ship. The hatch slid shut behind him.

Elsu led the way down the companionway to the piloting chamber. She fair flung herself into the chair, her hands flying across the board, rousing systems, initiating checks. From the edge of the chamber, Ren Zel watched as she woke her ship, her motions nearer frenzy than the smooth control his teachers had bade him strive to achieve.

She turned in the pilot's chair, her face flushed, eyes brilliantly blue, and raised a hand to beckon him forward.

"Come, come! Second board awaits you, as we agreed! Sit and make yourself known to the ship!" Her high voice carried a note that seemed to echo the frenzy of her board-run and Ren Zel hesitated a moment longer, not quite trusting—

"So an intra-system is not to your liking?" she inquired, her voice sharp with ridicule. "Perhaps the legendary Ren Zel dea Judan flies only Jumpships."

That stung, and he very nearly answered in kind. Then he recalled her as she had been the night before, inflicting her hurts, tempting him, or so it seemed, to hurt her in return—and he made his answer mild.

"Indeed, I took my second class on just such a ship as this," he said and walked forward at last to sit in the co-pilot's chair.

She glanced at him out of the edge of her eyes. "Forgive me, Pilot. I am not usually so sharp. The lift will improve my temper."

He could think of nothing to say to that and covered this lapse by sliding his license into the slot. There was a moment's considering pause from the ship's computer, then his board came live with a *beep*. Ren Zel initiated systems check.

Elsu Meriandra was already on line to the Tower, requesting clearance. "On business of Clan Jabun," Ren Zel heard and spun in his chair to stare at her. To characterize a mere pleasure-lift as—

His wife cut the connection to the Tower, looked over to him and laughed. "Oh, wonderful! And say you have never told Tower that a certain lift was just a little more urgent than the facts supported!"



Elsu's ship was a small middle-aged packetspacer, built for intra-system work, not for hyperspace. It would also, Ren

Changeling

"And yet we are not on the business of Clan Jabun," Ren Zel pointed out, remembering to speak mildly.

"Pahl!" she returned, her fingers dancing across the board, waking the gyros and the navcomp. "It is certainly in the best interest of Jabun that one of its children not deteriorate into a jittercase, for cause of being worldbound." She leaned back in the pilot's chair and sighed. "Ah, but it will be fine to lift, will it not, Pilot?"

"Yes," Ren Zel said truthfully. "Whither bound, Pilot?"

"Just into orbit, I think, and a long skim down. Do you fancy a late-night dinner at Head o' Port when we are through?"

Ren Zel's entire quartershare was insufficient to purchase a dinner at Head o' Port, which he rather thought she knew.

"Why not a glass and a dinner at Findoir's? There are bound to be some few of our comrades there."

She moved her shoulders. The comm beeped and she flipped the toggle.

"Dancer."

While she listened to Tower's instruction, Ren Zel finished his board checks and, seeing that she was feeding cords into her side, reached 'round to engage the shock webbing.

"Pilot?" he inquired, when she made no move to do the same.

"Eh?" he blinked at him, then smiled. "Oh, I often fly unwebbed! It enhances the pleasure immeasurably."

Perhaps it did, but it was also against every regulation he could think of. He opened his mouth to say so, but she waved a slim hand at him.

"No, do not say it! Regulation is all very well when one is flying contract, but this is pleasure, and I intend to be pleased!" She turned back to her board. The seconds to lift were counting down on the center board. Ren Zel ran another quick, unobtrusive check, then Elsu hit the engage and they were rising.

It was a fine, blood-warming thing, that lift. Elsu flew at the very edge of her craft's limits and Ren Zel found plenty to do as second board. He found her rhythm at last and matched it, the two of them putting the packet through its paces. They circled Casia twice, hand-flying, rather than let the automatics have it. Ren Zel was utterly absorbed by the task, caught up entirely in the other pilot's necessity, enwrapped in that state of vivid concentration that comes when one is flying well, in tune with one's flight-partner, and—

His board went dead.

Automatically, his hand flashed out, slapping the toggle for the back-up board.

Nothing happened.

"Be at ease, Pilot!" Elsu Meriandra murmured, next to him.

"I have your board safe. And now we shall have us a marvelous skim!"

She'd overridden him. Ren Zel felt panic boil in his belly, forced himself to breathe deeply, to impose calm. He was second board on a ship owned by the pilot sitting first. As first, she had overridden his board. It was her right to do so, for any reason, or for none—regulations and custom backed her on this.

So, he breathed deeply, as he had been taught, and leaned back in his chair, the shock web snug around him, watching the descent on the screens.

Elsu's path of re-entry was steep—Ren Zel had once seen a tape of a Scout descent that was remarkably like the course she had chosen. She sat close over the board, unwebbed, her face intent, a fever-glitter in her eyes, her hands hurtling across her board, fingers flickering, frenzy just barely contained.

Ren Zel recruited his patience, watching the screens, the descent entirely out of his hands. Gods, how long since he had sat *passenger*, wholly dependent on another pilot's skill?

The ship hit atmosphere and turbulence in the same instant. There was a bump, and a twitch. Ren Zel flicked forward, hands on his useless board—and sat back as Elsu made the recover and threw him an unreadable look from over-brilliant blue eyes.

"Enjoy the skim, Pilot," she said. "Unless you doubt my skill?"

Well, no. She flew like a madwoman, true enough, but she had caught that boggle just a moment ago very smoothly, indeed.

The skim continued, and steeper still, until Ren Zel was certain that it was the old Scout tape she had fashioned her course upon.

He looked to the board, read hull-heat and external pressure, and did not say to the woman beside him that an old packet was never the equal of a Scout ship. She would have to level out soon, and take

the rest of the skim at a shallow glide, until they had bled sufficient momentum to safely land.

She had not yet leveled out when they hit a second bit of turbulence, this more demanding than the first.

The ship bucked, twisted—again Ren Zel snapped to his dead board, and again the pilot on first corrected the boggle and flew on.

Moments passed, and still Elsu did not level their course.

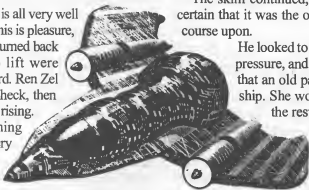
Ren Zel leaned forward, checking gauges and tell-tales, feeling his stomach tighten.

"Pilot," he said moderately, "we must adjust course."

She threw him a glance. "Must we?" she asked, dulcet. "But I am flying this ship, Ren Zel dea' Judan."

"Indeed you are. However, if we do not level soon, even a pilot as skilled as yourself will find it—difficult—to pull out. This ship was not built for such entries."

"This ship," she stated, "will do what I wish it to do." Incredibly, she kept her course.



Absolute Magnitude

Ren Zel looked to the screens. They were passing over the ocean, near enough that he could see the v-wakes of the sea-ships, and, then, creeping into the edge of screen four, towering thunderheads where the water met the land.

"Pilot," he said, but Elsu had seen them.

"Aha! Now you shall see flying!"

They pierced the storm in a suicide rush; winds cycled, slapping them into a spin, Elsu corrected, and lightning flared, leaving screen three dead.

"Give me my board!" Ren Zel cried. "Pilot, as you love your life—"

She threw him a look in which he had no trouble reading hatred, and the wind struck again, slamming them near into a somersault in the instant her hand slapped the toggle. The cabin lights flickered as Ren Zel's board came live, and there was a short, snapped-off scream.

Poised over the board, he fought—fought the ship, fought the wind, fought his own velocity. The wind tossed the ship like so many flower petals, and they tumbled again. Ren Zel fought, steadied his craft and passed out of the storm, into a dazzle of sunlight and the realization that the ground was much too close.

He slapped toggles, got the nose up, rose, rose—

His board snapped and fizzed—desperately, he slapped the toggle for the secondary back-up.

There was none.

The ship screamed like a live thing when it slammed into the ground.

On the morning of his third day out of the healing unit and his second day at home, his sister Eba brought him fresh clothes, all neatly folded and smelling of sunshine. Her face was strained, her eyes red with weeping.

"You are called to the meeting between Obrelt and Jabun next hour, brother," she said, her voice husky and low. "Aunt Chane will come for you."

Ren Zel went forward a step, hand outstretched to the first of his kin he had seen or spoken to since the accident. "Eba?"

But she would not take his hand, she turned her face from him and all but ran from the room. The door closed behind her with the wearisome, too-familiar sound of the lock snapping to.

Next hour. In a very short time, he would know the outcome of Jabun's pursuit of Balance, though what Balance they might reasonably take remained, after three full days of thought on the matter, a mystery to him. The Guild would surely have recovered the flight box. They would have run the tape, built a sim, *proven* that it had been an accident, with no malice attached. A tragedy, surely, for Jabun to lose a daughter. A double tragedy, that she should die while in Obrelt's keeping. There would be the life-price to pay, but—Balance?

He considered the computer in its alcove near the window. Perhaps today he would be allowed to access the nets, to find what the world knew of this?

But no, he was a pilot and a pilot's understanding was quicker than that. He knew well enough the conditions of his tenure here. All praise to Terran poetry, he even knew the proper name for it.

House arrest.

Escorted by med techs, he'd arrived home from the Medical Center, and brought not to his own rooms, but to the Quiet Suite, where those who mourned, who were desperately ill—or dying—were housed. There was a med tech on-call. It was he who showed Ren Zel the computer, the call button, the bed; he who locked the door behind him when he left.

There was entertainment available if one wished to sit and watch, but the communit reached only the med tech and the computer accessed only neutral information—no news, no pilot-net; the standard piloting drills did not open to his code, nor had anyone brought his books, or asked if he wished to have them. This was not how kin cared for kin.

Slowly, Ren Zel went over to the pile of clean clothes. He slipped off the silver-and-indigo robe, and slowly, carefully, put on the modest white shirt and dark trousers. He sat down to pull his boots on and sat a little longer, listening to the blood singing in his ears. He was yet low of energy. It would take some time, so the med tech told him—perhaps as long as a relumma—to fully regain his strength. He had been advised to take frequent naps, and not to overtire himself.

Yes, very good.

He pushed himself to his feet and went back to the table. His jacket was there. Wonderingly, he shook it out, fingering the places where the leather had been mended, pieced together by the hand of a master. As he had been.

The touch and smell of the leather was a reassuring and personal commonplace among the bland and antiseptic ambience of the quiet suite. He swung the jacket up and on, settling it on his shoulders, and looked at the remaining items on the table.

His piloting license went into its secret pocket. For a moment, he simply stared at the two cantra pieces, unable to understand why there should be so much money to his hand. In the end, still wondering, he slipped them into the pocket of his jacket.

Behind him, he heard the lock snap, and turned, with a bare fraction of his accustomed speed, staggering a little on the leg that had been crushed.

Chane dea'Judan stepped into the room, the door sliding silently closed behind her. He stood where he was, uncertain, after Eba and two days of silence, what he might expect from his own kin.

If Aunt Chane will not speak to me, he thought, I will not be able to bear it.

She paused at the edge of the table and opened her arms. "Ren Zel."

He almost fell into the embrace. His cheek against her shoulder, he felt her stroke his hair as if he were small again

Changeling

and needing comfort after receiving some chance cruelty from one of his cousins.

"It's gone ill, child," she murmured at last and he stirred, straightened, and stood away, searching her solemn face.

"Ill," he repeated. "But the life-price of a pilot is set by the Guild. I will take the—" He stopped, struck dumb by the impossible.

Aunt Chane was weeping.

"Tell me," he said then. "Aunt?"

She took a moment to master herself, and met his eyes squarely.

"A life for a life," she said. "Jabun invokes the full penalty. Council and Guild uphold them."

He stared at her. "The flight box. Surely, the Guild has dumped the data from the flight box?"

"Dumped it and read it and sent it by direct pinbeam to a Master Pilot, who studied it and passed judgement," Aunt Chane said, her voice edged with bitterness. "Jabun turned his face from the Master Pilot's findings—and the request to hold open review at Casiaport Hall! He called on three first class pilots from Casiaport Guild to judge again. I am told that this is his right, under Guild law." She took a deep breath and looked him squarely in the eye.

"The honored pilots of Casiaport Guild find you guilty of negligence in flight, my child, the result of your error being that Pilot Elsu Meriandra untimely met her death."

But this was madness. They had the box, the actual recording of the entire flight, from engage to crash.

"Aunt—"

She held up her hand, silencing him.

"I have seen the tape." She paused, something like pride—or possibly awe—showing in her eyes. "You will understand that it meant very little to me. I was merely astonished that you could move so quickly, recover so well, only to have the ship itself fail you at the last instant. . . ." Another pause.

"I have also read the report sent by the Master Pilot, who makes points regarding Pilot Meriandra's performance that were perhaps too hard for a father to bear. The Master Pilot was clear that the accident was engineered by Pilot Meriandra, that she had several times ignored your warnings, and that she had endangered both ship and pilots by denying you access to your board during most of the descent. That she was not webbed in . . ." Chane let that drift off. Ren Zel closed his eyes.

"I heard her scream, but I could not—the ship . . ."

"The Master Pilot commends you. The others . . ."

"The others," Ren Zel finished wearily, "are allied to Jabun and dare not risk his anger."

"Just so. And Obrelt—forgive us, child. Obrelt cannot shield you. Jabun has demonstrated that we will starve if we reject this Balancing."

"Demonstrated?"

She sighed. "Eba has been released from her position, her keys stripped from her by the owner before the entire staff of the shop. Wil Bar was served the same, though the owner

there was kind enough to receive the keys in the privacy of the back office. Both owners are closely allied with Clan Jabun."

Gods. No wonder Eba wept and would not see him.

"We will mourn you," Aunt Chane said softly. "They cannot deny us that." She glanced at the clock, stepped up and offered her arm.

"It is time."

He looked into his Aunt's face, saw sorrow and necessity. Carefully, tender of the chancy leg, put his hand on the offered arm and allowed himself to be led downstairs to die.

The House's modest ballroom was jammed to overflowing. All of Clan Obrelt, from the eldest to the youngest, were present to witness Ren Zel's death. Fewer of Clan Jabun were likewise present, scarcely a dozen, all adult, saving one child—a toddler with white-blond hair and wide blue eyes that Ren Zel knew must be Elsu's daughter.

On the dais usually occupied by musicians during Obrelt's rare entertainments was a three-sided table. On the shortest side stood Ren Zel; Aunt Chane and Obrelt Himself were together at one of the longer sides; Jabun and his second, a grey-haired man with steel-blue eyes, stood facing them.

In the front row of witnesses sat a figure of neither House, an old and withered man who one might see a time or two a year, at weddings and funerals, always wearing the same expression of polite sadness: Tor Cam tel' Vana, the Eyes of Casia's Council of Clans.

"We are here," Jabun lifted his voice so that it washed against the far walls of the room, "to put the death upon the man who murdered Elsu Meriandra, pilot first class, daughter of Jabun."

"We are here," Obrelt's voice was milder, but no more difficult for those in the back to hear, "to mourn Obrelt's son Ren Zel, who dies as the result of a piloting accident."

Jabun glared, started—and was restrained by the hand of his second on his sleeve. Thus moderated, he turned his hot eyes to Ren Zel.

"What have you in your pockets, dead man? It is my Balance that you go forth from here nameless, rootless and without possessions."

Slowly, Ren Zel reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew the two cantra pieces.

"Put them on the table," Jabun hissed.

"He will return them to his pocket," Obrelt corrected and met the other's glare with a wide calmness. "Ren Zel belongs to Obrelt until he dies. It is the tradition of our Clan that the dead shall have two coins, one to an eye." He gestured toward the short side of the table, still holding Jabun's gaze. "Ren Zel, your pocket."

Obediently, he slipped the coins away.

Once again, Jabun sputtered; once again, he was held back by his second, who leaned forward and stared hard into Ren Zel's face.

"There is something else, dead man. We will see your license destroyed ere you are cast away."

Absolute Magnitude

Ren Zel froze. His license? Were they mad? How would he work? How would he live?

"My nephew gave his life for that license, Honored Sir," Aunt Chane said serenely. "He dies because he was worthy of it. What more fitting than it be interred with him?"

"That was not our agreement," the second stated.

"Our agreement," said Obrelt with unbreached calm, "was that Ren Zel dea' Judan be cast out of his Clan, and made a stranger to his kin, his loss to Obrelt to precisely Balance the loss of Elsu Meriandra to Clan Jabun. Elsu Meriandra was not made to relinquish her license in death. We desire, as Jabun desires, an exact Balancing of accounts."

Jabun Himself who answered, and in such terms that Ren Zel would have trembled, had there been room for fear beside the agony in his heart.

"You think to buy him a life? Think again! What ship will employ a dead man? None that Jabun knows by name." He shifted, shaking off his second's hand.

In the first row of witnesses, the aged man rose. "These displays delay and impair the death," murmured the Eyes of Council. "Only his Delm may lay conditions upon a dying man, and there is no death until the Delm declares it." He paused, sending a thoughtful glance to Jabun. "The longest Balance-death recorded stretched across three sundowns."

Jabun glared briefly at the Eyes, then turned back to the table.

"He may retain the license," he said, waving his hand dismissively. "May it do him well in the Low Port."

There was silence; the Eyes bowed toward the Balancing table and reseated himself, hands folded on his knee.

Obrelt cleared his throat and raised his voice, chanting in the High Tongue.

"Ren Zel dea' Judan, you are cast out, dead to Clan and kin. You are nameless, without claim or call upon this House. Begone. Begone." His voice broke, steady. "Begone."

Ren Zel stood at the small side of the table, staring out over the roomful of his kin. All the faces he saw were solemn; not a few were tear-tracked.

"Begone!" snarled Jabun. "Die, child-killer!"

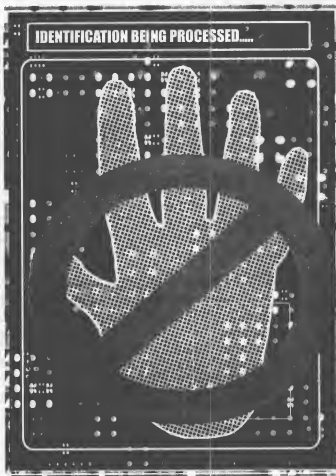
In the back of the ballroom, one of the smallest cousins began to wail. Steeling himself, not daring to look at Chane, nor anywhere, save his own feet, Ren Zel walked forward, down the three steps to the floor; forward, down the thin path that opened as the cousins moved aside to let him gain the door; forward, down the hallway, to the foyer. The door stood open. He walked on, down the steps to the path, down the path to the gate.

"Go on!" Jabun shouted from behind. Ren Zel did not turn. He pushed the gate open and walked out.

The gate crashed shut behind him and he spun, his heart slamming into overaction. Shaking, he flattened his palm against the plate, felt the tingle of the reader and—

Nothing else. The gate remained locked. His print had been removed from the House computer. He was no longer of Obrelt.

He was dead.



It was full night when he staggered into the Pilots Guildhall in Casiaport. He'd dared not break a cantra for a taxi-ride and his clan-credit had proven dead when he tried to purchase a news flimsy with the headline over his photograph proclaiming "Pilot Dead in Flight Negligence Aftermath." His sight was weaving and he was limping heavily off the leg that had been crushed. He had seen Lai Tor in the street a block or an eternity over, raised his hand—and his friend turned his face aside and hurried off in the opposite direction.

Dead, Ren Zel thought, and smiled without humor. Very well, then.

A ghost, he walked into the Guildhall. The duty clerk looked up, took him in with a glance and turned her face away.

"You are not required to speak to me," Ren Zel said, and his voice sounded not quite . . . comfortable . . . in his own ears. "You are not required to acknowledge my presence in any way. However." He pulled his license from its secret pocket and lay it face down on the reader. "This license—this *valid license*—has a debt on it. This license will not be dishonored. List the license number as "on call," duty clerk. The debt will be paid."

Silence from the clerk. No move, toward either the license or the computer.

Changeling

Ren Zel took a ragged breath, gathering his failing resources. "Is Casiaport Guildhall in the practice of refusing repayment of contracted loans?"

The clerk sighed. Keeping her eyes averted, she turned, picked up the license and disappeared to the back.

Ren Zel gasped, questioning the wisdom of this play, now that it was too late, his license possibly forfeit, his life and his livelihood with—

The clerk reappeared. Eyes stringently downturned, she placed a sheet of printout and his license on the countertop. Then she turned her back on him.

Ren Zel's heart rose. It had worked! Surely, this was an assignment. Surely—

He snatched up his license and slipped it away, then grabbed the paper, forcing his wavering sight to focus, to find the name of the client, lift time, location.

It took him all of three heartbeats to realize that he was not looking at flight orders, but an invoice. It took another three heartbeats to understand that the invoice recorded the balance left to be paid on his loan, neatly zeroed out to three decimal places, "forgiven" stamped across the whole in tall blue letters, and then smaller blue letters, where the Guildmaster had dated the thing, and signed her name.

Tears rose. He blinked them away, concentrating on folding the paper with clumsy, shaking fingers. Well and truly, he was a dead man. Kinless, with neither comrades nor Guildmates to support him. Worldbound, without hope of work or flight, without even a debt to lend weight to his existence.

The paper was folded, more or less. He shoved it into his jacket pocket, squared his aching shoulders and went out into the night Port.

On the walk, he turned right, toward Findoir's, taking all of two steps before recollecting himself. Not Findoir's. Every pilot on Port had news of his death by now.

His comrades would turn their faces away from him, as Lai Tor had. He might speak to them, but they would not answer. He was beyond them—outcast. Nameless. Guildless. Clanless. Dead.

The tears rose again. He blinked them away, aghast. To weep openly in the street, where strangers might see him? Surely, even a ghost kept better Code than that.

He limped a few steps to the left and set his shoulders against the cool stone wall of Casiaport Guildhall. His chest hurt; the bad leg was afire, and the street scene before him seemed somewhat darker than even night might account for.

Ren Zel took a breath, imposing board-calm. Dispassionately, he cataloged his resources:

A first-class piloting license. A jump-pilot's spaceleather jacket, scarred and multiply patched. Two cantra.

He leaned his head against the stone, not daring to close his eyes, even here, in the relative safety of Main Port.

They expected that he would go to Low Port, Clan Jabun did. They expected him to finish his death there. Obrelt had cast against that, winning him the right to hold his license; winning him, so he must have thought, a chance to fly. To live.

And how had Jabun countered? Briefly, Ren Zel closed his eyes, seeing again the three-sided table, the crowd of cousins, weeping and pale; heard Jabun snarl: "What ship will employ a dead man? None that Jabun knows by name."

And that was his doom. There was no ship on Casiaport that Jabun could not name.

Or was there?

Ren Zel opened his eyes.

Jabun's daughter—had not spoken Terran.

Perhaps then her father did not know the names of *all* the ships on port.

He pushed away from the wall and limped down the walk, heading for Mid Port.

The man behind the desk took his license and slid into the computer. His face was bored as he scrolled down the list of Ren Zel's completed assignments.

"Current," he said indifferently. "Everything in order, except..." The scrolling stopped. Ren Zel's mouth went dry and he braced himself against the high plastic counter. Now. Now was when the last hope died.

The duty clerk—no. The roster boss looked down at him, interest replacing boredom in his face.

"This note here about being banned from the big hall. That temporary or permanent?"

"Permanent," Ren Zel answered, and was ashamed to hear his voice shake.

"OK," the boss said. He pulled the license out of the slot and tossed it across the counter. Exhausted though he was, still Ren Zel's hand moved, snatching the precious thing out of the air, and sliding it safely away.

"OK," the boss said again. "Your card's good. Fact is, it's too good. Jump-pilot. Not much need for jump-pilots outta this hall. We get some intersystem jobs, now and then. But mostly the jumps go through Casiaport Guild. Little bit of a labor tax we cheerfully pay, for the honor of being allowed on-world."

It was an astonishment to find irony here. Ren Zel lifted his eyes and met the suddenly knowing gaze of the roster boss, who nodded, a half-smile on his lips.

"You got that, did you? Good boy."

"I do not," Ren Zel said, careful, so careful, of the slippery, mode-less Terran syllables, "require a jump-ship, sir. I am... qualified... to fly intra-system."

"Man's gotta eat, I guess." The boss shook his head, stared down at the computer screen and Ren Zel stood rooted, muscles tense as if expecting a blow.

The boss let his breath out, noisily.

"All right, here's what. You wanna fly outta here, you gotta qualify." He held up a hand, though Ren Zel had said nothing. "I know you got a first class card. What I don't know is, can you run a Terran board. Gotta find that out before I turn you loose with a client's boat." He tipped his head. "You followin' this, kid?"

"Yes, sir." Ren Zel took a hard breath, his head aching with the effort of deciphering the man's fluid, idiomatic Terran. "I am... required... to, to demonstrate my worth to the hall."

Absolute Magnitude

"Close enough," the boss allowed, crossing his arms atop his computer. "The other thing you gotta do, after you pass muster, is post a bond."

Ren Zel frowned. "Forgive me, I do not—"bond"?"

"Right." The boss looked out into nothing for a moment, feeling over concepts, or so Ren Zel thought. "A bond is—a contract. You and me sign a paper that basically says you'll follow the company rules and keep your face clean for a Standard, and to prove you're serious about it, you give me a cantra to keep. At the end of the year, if you kept your side of the contract, I give you your money back." Again, he held up his hand, as if he expected Ren Zel's protest.

"I know your word binds you, you being all honorable and Liaden and like that, but it's Gromit Company policy, OK? You don't post bond, you don't fly."

"O . . . K." Ren Zel said slowly, buying himself a thimbleful of time while he worked the explanation out. He gathered, painfully, that the hall required him to post earnest money, against any misfortune that might befall a client's goods while they were under his care. In light of what had happened to the last item entrusted to him in flight, it seemed that the hall was merely prudent in this. However . . .

"If the . . . Gromit Company . . . does not fulfill its side of the contract?"

The boss gave a short laugh. "Liadens! If the company don't fulfill its side of the contract, kid, we'll all be lookin' for work."

That didn't quite scan, but he was tired, and his head ached, and his leg did, and if he did not fly out of the Terran hall, who else on all of Casiaport would hire him? He inclined his head.

"I accept the terms," he said, as formally as one could, in Terran.

"Do you?" The boss seemed inclined to find that humorous as well. "OK, then. Report back here tomorrow Port-noon and we'll have you take the tests. Oh—one more thing."

"Yes."

The man's voice was stern. "No politics. I mean that. I don't want any Liaden Balances or vendettas or whateverhell you do for fun coming into my hall. You bring any of that here and you're out, no matter how good a pilot you are. Scan that?"

Very nearly, Ren Zel laughed. Balance. Who would seek Balance with a dead man?

He took a shaky breath. "I understand. There is no one who . . . owes . . . me. Anything."

The boss held his eyes for a long moment, then nodded. "Right. Keep it that way." He paused, then sighed.

"You got a place to sleep?"

Ren Zel pushed away from the counter. "I . . . not . . ." He sighed in his turn, sharply, frustrated with his ineptitude. "Forgive me. I mean to say—not this evening. Sir."

"Huh." The boss extended a long arm and hooked a key off the board by his computer. "This ain't a guild hall. All we got here is a cot for the willfly. Happens the willfly is already in the air, so you can use the cot." He threw the key and Ren Zel

caught it between both palms. "You pass the entry tests, you find your own place, got it?"

Not entirely, no. But comprehension could wait upon the morrow.

"Yes, sir," Ren Zel said respectfully, then spent two long seconds groping for the proper Terran phrase. "Thank you, sir."

The man's eyebrows rose in apparent surprise. "You're welcome," he said, then jerked his head to the left. "Second door down that hall. Get some sleep, kid. You're out on your feet."

"Yes," Ren Zel whispered, and managed a ragged approximation of a bow of gratitude before turning and limping down the hall. He slid the key into the slot and the second door whisked open.

The room beyond was no larger than it needed to be to hold a Terran-sized cot. Ren Zel half-fell across it, his head hitting the pillow more by accident than design. He managed to struggle to a sitting position and pulled off his boots, setting them by long habit where he would find them instantly, should he be called to fly. After sober thought, he removed his jacket and folded it under the pillow, then lay down for a second time.

He was asleep before the timer turned the room lights off.

On its face, the case had been simple enough: A catastrophe had overtaken two first class pilots. First board was dead; second nearly so, and Guild law required that such matters be reviewed and judged by a Master Pilot. So the Guild had called upon Master Pilot Shan yos' Galan Clan Korval, Master Trader and Captain of the tradeship *Dutiful Passage*.

Shan had, he admitted to himself, ridden the luck long enough, having several times during the last three Standards been in *precisely* the wrong place to be called upon to serve as Master of Judgement, though his name had been next on the roster.

This time he was the only Master Pilot near, and in fact had already filed a flight plan calling for him to be *on*, the planet on which the fatal incident had occurred. Thus the Guild snared him at last, and offered a budget should he need to study what was left of the ship, or convene a board to do so.

A budget was all very good, but it did nothing to lessen Shan's dislike of this particular duty. Still, he had read the file, reviewed the raw data from the flight box and, finally, in a state of strong disbelief, flew the sim.

Even in simulation, flying fatalities is—unpleasant. It was not unknown that Master Pilots emerged weeping from such flights.

Shan emerged from flying the Casia fatal in an all-but-incandescent fury.

First board was dead because she was a fool—and so he stated in his report. More—she had allowed her stupidity to endanger not only the fine and able pilot who had for some reason found it necessary to sit second to her, but unnamed

Changeling

and innocent civilians. That the ship had finally crashed in an empty plain was due entirely to the skill of the pilot sitting second board, who might have avoided the ground entirely, had only the secondary back-up board required by Guild regulations been in place.

Shaking with rage, Shan pulled the ship's maintenance records.

The pilot-owner had not even seen fit to keep to a regular schedule of routine maintenance. Several systems were marked weak in the last recorded mechanic's review—three Standard years past!—at which time it was also noted that the co-pilot's back-up board was non-operational.

Typing at white heat, Shan finished his report with praise for the co-pilot, demanded an open hearing to be held at Casiaport Guildhall within a day of his arrival on-Port, and shunted the scalding entirety to the Tower to be pinbeamed to Guild Headquarters, copy to Casiaport Guildmaster.

He had then done his best to put Casia out of his mind, though he'd noted the name of the surviving pilot. Ren Zel dea Judan Clan Obrelt. *There* was a pilot Korval might do well to employ.

"Ren Zel, get your ass over here." Christopher's voice was stern.

Ren Zel checked, saw the flicker of anger on his co-pilot's face and waved her on toward the gate. "Run system checks. I will be with you quickly."

"Yah," she said, grumpily. "Don't let Chris push you around, Pilot."

"The schedule is tight," Ren Zel returned, which effectively clinched the argument and sent her striding toward the gate. Ren Zel altered course for the counter and looked up at the roster boss.

"Christopher?"

The big man crossed his arms on top his computer and frowned down at him. "What'd I tell you when you first signed on? Eh? About what I didn't want none of in this hall?"

"You wished no vendettas, Balance or whateverthehell I might do for fun to disturb the peace of the hall," Ren Zel recited promptly, face betraying nothing of the puzzlement he felt.

An unwilling grin tugged at the edge of Christopher's mouth. "Remember that, do you? Then you remember that I said I'd throw you out if you brought anything like that here."

"Yes. . . ." What was this? Ren Zel wondered. Half-alrumma he had been flying out of the Terran hall. And now—

"Guy come in here last night, looking for you," the boss said now. "Fancy leather jacket, earrings, uptown clothes. Blonde hair going gray; one of them enameled rings, like the House bosses wear. Talked Trade, and I wouldn't call him polite. Seemed proud of his accent. Reeled off your license number like it tasted bad and wanted to know if it was registered here." Christopher shrugged. "Might've told him no—ain't any business of his who flies outta this hall—but

your number was right up there on the board, with today's flight schedule. He didn't talk Terran, but he could read numbers quick enough."

Jabun? was Ren Zel's first thought—a thought he shook away, forcefully. There was no reason for Jabun to seek him; he was *dead* and it was witnessed by the Eyes. Surely Jabun, of all the Clans on Casia, knew that.

In the meantime, Christopher was awaiting an explanation, and his co-pilot was awaiting him at the ship they contracted were to lift in a very short while.

"I—do not know," he told the roster boss, with what he hoped was plain truth. "There is no one—*no one*—who has cause to seek me here. Or to seek me anywhere. I am . . . outside of Balance." He hesitated, recalled his co-pilot's phrase and offered it up as something that might be sensible to another Terran: "I am *no longer a player*."

"Huh." The boss considered that for a moment, then shook his head. "OK, but it better not happen again." He glanced to one side. "Look at the clock, willya? You gonna lift that ship on time, Pilot?"

"Yes," said Ren Zel, taking that for dismissal. He turned and strode quickly toward the gate. The leg that had been crushed had not—entirely—healed, and was prone to betray him at awkward moments, so he did not quite dare run, though he did move into a trot as he passed the gate onto the field.

The client's ship—a packet somewhat older than the one that had belonged to Elsu Meriandra—was mercifully near the gate, the ramp down and the hatch open. Ren Zel clattered up-ramp, slapped the hatch closed as he sped through and hit the pilot's chair a heartbeat later, automatically reaching over his shoulder for the shock strap.

"Tower's online," Suzan said, her fingers busy and capable on the second's board. "We got a go in two minutes, Pilot."

"Yes." He called up his board, flickering through the checks; reviewing the flight plan and locking it; pulling in traffic, weather and status reports. "Cargo?"

"Port proctor's seal on it."

"Good. Please tell the Tower we are ready."

He and Suzan had flown together before—indeed, they were already seen as a team among certain of the clients, who had made a point to ask Christopher to "send the pilots we had last time." This was good; they made a name for themselves—and a few extra dex.

Suzan was a solid second classer with more flight time on her license than the first class for whom she sat co-pilot. She flew a clean, no-nonsense board, utterly dependable; and Ren Zel, cautiously, liked her. From time to time, she displayed a tendency to come the elder kin with him, which he supposed was natural enough, considering that she overtopped him, outmassed him, and could easily have given him twelve Standards.

"Got the go," she said now.

"Then we go," Ren Zel replied, and engaged the gyros.

Absolute Magnitude

Night Port was in its last hours when Ren Zel and Suzan walked through the gate and into the company's office.

Christopher's second, a dour person called Atwood, waved them over to the counter.

"Guy in here looking for you, Ren Zel."

His blood chilled. Gods, no. Let it not be that Christopher was forced to send him away.

Some of his distress must have shown on his face, more shame to him, for Suzan frowned and put her big hand on his sleeve. "Pilot?"

He shook her off, staring at Atwood, trying to calm his pounding heart. "A—guy. The same who asked before?"

Atwood shook her head. "New. Chris says," she glanced down, reading the message off the computer screen: "Tell Ren Zel there's another guy looking for him. This one's a gentleman. Asked for him by name. Might be a job in it." She looked up. "It says he—the guy—will be back here second hour, Day Port, and wants to talk to you."

He took a breath, imposing calmness. *By name?* And who on Casia would speak his name, saving these, his comrades, Terrans, all. Ah. Christopher perhaps would . . . understand . . . a Terran gentleman. How such a one might have the name of Ren Zel dea' Judan was a mystery, but a mystery easily solved.

He glanced at the clock over the schedule board: last hour, Night Port, was half gone. Too little time to return to his room, on the ragged edge of Mid Port. Too long to simply wait on a bench in the hall . . .

"Bout enough time to have a bite to eat." Suzan grinned and jerked her head toward the door.

"There's a place couple streets down that actually brews real coffee," she said. "C'mon, Pilot. My treat."

Coffee, Ren Zel thought, some little while later, was clearly an acquired taste.

The rest of the meal was unexceptional—even enjoyable—in its oddness. The one blight was the lack of what Suzan styled 'poorbells.' An inquiry after this unknown and absent foodstuff gained Ren Zel the information that poorbells were a kind of edible fungus, after which the coffee tasted not quite as bitter as he had at first thought it.

The meal done, Suzan drained her third cup and went to the front to settle the bill, stubbornly refusing his offer to pay for his share with a, "Told you it was my treat, didn't I?"

Ren Zel shrugged into his jacket and followed her slowly. "Treat" was a Terran concept, roughly translating into "a gift freely given," with no Balance attending. Still, it went against his sense of propriety, that his co-pilot should give him a gift. Perhaps he might search out some of these poorbells elsewhere on port and make her a gift in return? He considered it, then found his thoughts drifting elsewhere, to the mysterious "gentleman" whom he was, very soon now, to meet.

That the "gentleman" was Terran seemed certain. That he would, indeed, offer Ren Zel dea' Judan a jump-pilot's contract, as Christopher seemed to think, was—not so certain.

But if the offer was made? Ren Zel wondered, stepping out onto the walkway and slipping his hands in the pockets of his jacket. If the unknown gentleman offered a standard jump contract, with its guarantee of setting the pilot on the world of his choice after the terms were fulfilled, then Ren Zel might yet prosper, though in a solitary, Terran sort of way. If he chose his port wisely, he—

"There!" The unfamiliar voice disrupted his thoughts, the single word in Liaden. He looked toward the sound, and saw a gaggle of five standing half-way to the corner. All were dressed in Low Port motley; four also wore the leather jackets of jump-pilots.

And not one of them, to Ren Zel's eye, was anything like a pilot.

The foremost, perhaps the one who had spoken, bowed, slightly and with very real malice.

"Dead man," he said with mock courtesy, "I am delighted" to find you so quickly. We are commissioned to deliver you a gift."

Yes—and all too likely the gift was a knife set between his ribs, after which his jacket would become a prize for the fifth in the pack.

"All right, Pilot, let's get us back to hall and see this mystery man of—" Suzan froze, the door to the restaurant still balanced on the ends of her fingers, looking from Ren Zel to the wolf pack.

"Friends of yours?"

He dared not take his eyes from the face of the leader, who seemed dismayed by the advent of a second, much larger, player in the game.

"No," he told Suzan.

"Right," she said, and pushed the door wider, rocking back on her heel. "There's a back door. After you."

Keeping his back to the wall, he slithered past her, then followed as she sped through the main dining room, down a short hallway and into the kitchen. She raised a hand to a woman in a tall, white hat, and opened the door in the far wall. In keeping with a co-pilot's duty, she stepped through first, then waved him after.

"OK. Down this alley about two blocks, there's a beer joint. Tom and Gina hang out there on their downshifts. We'll pick 'em up and all go back to the hall together."

It was prudent plan, Tom and his partner being no stranger to street brawls, if even half of their stories were to be believed. Ren Zel inclined his head. "Very well."

"Great. This way."

They had gone perhaps a block in the direction of the tavern, when Ren Zel heard a noise behind them. A glance over his shoulder showed him the wolf pack just entering the alley by the rear door to the restaurant.

Changeling

Suzan swore. Ren Zel saw the gleam of metal among the pack as they moved into a ragged run nothing like the smooth flow of pilot motion. Though it would serve. And when they were caught, the wolf pack would not care whether they killed one or two.

He already had one death on his hands.

"Go on," he said to Suzan. "I will speak with them."

She snorted. "Pilot, I thought you knew I wasn't as big a fool as I look. Those boys don't want talk—they want blood." She reached down and grabbed his arm.

"Run!"

Perforce, he ran, stretching to match her pace, willing the bad leg not to betray him. Behind, he heard their pursuers, chanting—"Dead man! Pilot slayer! Dead man!"—and found time to be grateful, that Suzan did not speak Liaden.

"Here," she gasped and pulled him with her to the right. One massive shoulder hit the plastic door, which sprang open, and they were eight running paces into a dark and not overcrowded room before Suzan let him go, shouting, "Vandals right behind us! Call the Watch!"

Several of the patrons of the room simply dropped the long sticks they had been holding and bolted for the front door, for which Ren Zel blamed them not in the least. Left on his own, he spun, fire lancing the bad leg, which held, thank the gods, and looked about him for a weapon.

There were several small balls on the green covered table just beside him. Before he had properly thought, he had snatched the nearest up. The ball was dense for something so small, but that was no matter. His hands moved in the familiar pattern, the thing was spinning and then airborne as the first of the wolf pack charged into the room.

The ball caught the fellow solidly in the nose. He went down with a grunt, not quite tripping the man immediately behind him. That one, quick enough, if not pilot-fast, leapt his comrade and landed on the balls of his feet, a chain dangling from his hand.

He saw Ren Zel and smiled. "Dead man. But still alive to pain, eh?" The chain flashed as the man jumped forward. Ren Zel ducked, heard metal scream over his head, grabbed one of the fallen long sticks and came up fast, whirling, stick held horizontal between his two hands.

The chain whipped again. Ren Zel threw the stick into the attack. The chain wrapped 'round the gleaming wood twice, and Ren Zel spun, trying to pull the weapon from his adversary's grip.

With a flourish, the wolf jumped forward, grabbed the stick and twisted. Ren Zel hung on, then lost his grip, danced back a step, and then another as the man raised the weapon in both hands and swung it, whistling, down.

Once again, action preceded thought. Ren Zel dove, rolling under the green covered table, heard chain and stick hit the floor behind him, and came up on the far side of the table just in time to see Suzan place a well-considered bar stool into the back of his opponent's head.

Elsewhere in the room, the remaining three of the pack were engaged with those of the patrons who had not run. Suzan waded back into the melee, swinging her bar stool with abandon. Thinking that he might yet have use for a weapon, Ren Zel went 'round the table to retrieve the long stick. The thing was shattered, the pieces still wrapped in chain. That he lie, judging he was more likely to harm himself than any adversary, should he try to wield such an unfamiliar weapon. He straightened, ears pricked. Yes—from the open front door came the sound of a siren, growing rapidly louder. The Port Proctors would soon arrive, Ren Zel thought, with a sinking sense of relief. All would be—

Across the room, the pack leader dropped his man with a flickering knife thrust. He spun, seeking new blood, saw Suzan's unprotected back—

"Ware!" Ren Zel screamed, but the word was in Liaden; she would not know . . .

Ren Zel jumped.

The knife flashed and he was between it and his co-pilot, one shoulder, covered in tough space-leather, taking the edge and turning it. Ren Zel spun with the force of the blow, deliberately using it as he came back around—

And the bad leg failed him.

Down he went, the wolf leader atop, and it was a muddle of shouts and blows and kicks before the quick shine of the knife, snaking past the leather this time, slicing cloth and flesh. Ren Zel lashed out, trying to escape the pain. The knife bit deeper, twisting. He screamed—and was gone.

66 Master Pilot, I regret," Casiaport Guildmaster was all but stuttering in distress. "Notification should have been sent. I swear to you that I will learn why it was not. However, the fact remains that no hearing has been scheduled. The case was adjudicated by three first class pilots, fault has been fixed and the matter is closed."

Shan lifted his eyebrows, feeling the woman's guilt like sandpaper against his skin, and she rushed on, babbling.

"Guild rule is plain, as the Master Pilot surely knows. Three first class pilots may judge, in the absence of a Master—and may overturn, in the case of a disputed judgement."

"Guild rule is plain," Shan agreed, in the mode of Master to Junior, which was higher than he usually spoke with another pilot. "Though it is considered good form to allow the Master Pilot in question to know that his judgement has been disputed."

"Since I am here in any wise," he continued, "I will see the file."

The Guildmaster gasped; covered the lapse with a bow.

"At once, Master Pilot. If you will step down to the private parlor, the file will be brought."

Shan inclined his head. "Bring also Pilot dea' Judan, if he is on-Port."

"Pilot dea' Judan?" the Guildmaster repeated, blankly.

"Pilot Ren Zel dea' Judan Clan Obrelt," Shan explained, wondering how such a one had risen to the rank of

Absolute Magnitude

Guildmaster of even so backward a port as Casia. "Surely you recall the name?"

"I—Indeed I do." She drew a deep breath and seemed to recruit her resources, bowing with solemn precision. "I regret. Ren Zel dea' Judan Clan Obrelt is dead."

Shan stared. "And yet I ran the license number through the port's own database just before departing my ship and found it listed as valid and active."

The Guildmaster said nothing.

"I see," Shan said, after several silent moments had elapsed. "I will review the case file now, Guildmaster." He turned and walked down the hall to the private parlor.

The file, brought moments later by a pale-faced duty clerk, was thin enough, and Shan was speedily master of its contents. True enough, his judgement had been set aside in favor of the cooler findings of three first class pilots, all of whom flew out of Casiaport Guildhall. Shan sighed, shaking his head as his Terran mother had sometimes shaken hers, expressing not negation so much as ironic disbelief.

There was a computer on the desk. He used his Master Pilot's card to sign onto the news net and spent a few minutes tracking down the proper archives, then shook his head again.

The legal notices told the story plainly: Obrelt had been cruelly Balanced into banishing their only pilot and naming him dead. None that kept strict Code would deal with a man who had no *Claw* to stand behind his debt and honor. . . .

It was the description of the circumstances surrounding death, fully witnessed by the Eyes of Council, that sent him once again into the public ways of Casiaport and finally to the Gromit Company's shabby Mid Port office.

There, the luck was slightly out, for Pilot dea' Judan was flying. The man behind the counter, one Christopher Iritaki, had suggested he return early next morning and had promised to let the pilot know that an appointment had been set in his name.

Shan presented himself at Gromit Company slightly in advance of the appointed hour, to find Mr. Iritaki's second on duty.

"I'm sure they'll be back any minute, sir," Ms. Atwood said, sending a faintly worried look at the clock. "They just went a couple streets over for a bite and a cup of coffee. Ren Zel's solid. He wouldn't miss an appointment for anything short of catastrophe."

"I'm sure you're right," Shan said soothingly. He smiled at the roster boss and had the satisfaction of seeing the worry fade from her face.

"I could fancy some coffee myself," he confided. "Do you happen to know which shop the pilots favor? Perhaps I won't be too late to share a cup with them."

It happened that Atwood did know the shop, which was a favorite among the company's pilots. "Only place on Casia you can get real coffee," she said, and Shan would have sworn there were tears in her eyes.

A few moments later, possessed of directions to this mecca, and having extracted Ms. Atwood's promise to hold Pilot

dea' Judan, should he arrive back at the Hall in the meantime, Shan sauntered out into the sharp air and rumble of early morning Casiaport.

Though there was nothing in his face or his gait to betray it, Shan was in a fever to shake the dust of Casia from his feet. His evening had been spent delving deeper than was perhaps good for his peace of mind into the affairs of Casiaport Guildhall and a certain Clan Jabun. The information he uncovered was disturbing enough that he found he had no choice, as a Master Pilot who owed duty to the Guild, but to call Jabun before a full board of inquiry.

However, he thought, stretching his long legs and turning into the street where he would find the "best damn coffee on Casia," that job of form-filing would certainly wait until he had Ren Zel dea' Judan safely in hand.

The coffee shop hove into view on his left, precisely as promised. Shan checked his long stride, but did not approach the door, which was crowded around with people, all staring up-street, where a commotion was in progress.

Shan felt the hairs shiver on the nape of his neck. What was it that Ms. Atwood had said? That nothing would keep Ren Zel from an appointment except calamity?

The scene up-street had every trapping of calamity, including the white trucks and flashing blue lights of Casiaport Rescue, clustered in such abundance that the Port Proctor's sun-yellow scooters were scarcely noticeable.

Shan stretched his legs again, moving quickly toward the hubbub.

He had no trouble walking through the cordon thrown up by the Proctors—he was never stopped by guards if he did not wish to be—and into what the sign by the door dignified as "Wilt's Poolroom and Tavern."

Inside—well.

All about were knots of med techs, attending the wounded. Elsewhere, Proctors questioned several unmistakable grounders who were for some reason wearing pilots' leathers. Toward the back of the room, a figure was shrouded in a white plastic sheet. Not far distant lay another figure, blood a black pool on the floor.

Shan touched a stud on his belt, alerting every *Dutiful Passage* crewmember on Port that there was a comrade down and in danger. Help was on the way. Now . . .

Directly before him, a Terran woman was shouting at a med tech.

"Hey!" she yelled in Trade, grabbing the tech's arm. "There's somebody over there who needs you."

The tech turned, glanced along the line of the Terran's finger, then slid his arm free, sighing slightly.

"I am not allowed to tend that one."

"What?" the Terran gaped. "You just patched up four of the worst desperados I've seen on this Port in a long time and you ain't allowed to tend a pilot who was wounded while protecting his co-pilot?"

Changeling

"He is Clanless," the tech said, with a note of finality in his soft, Liaden voice.

"He'll be *lifeless* if you people don't do something for him soon!"

The tech turned his back.

The Terran pilot raised her hand, and Shan swung forward, catching her lightly 'round the wrist.

"Precisely how will being arrested for assault help your pilot?" he inquired in Terran.

The woman spun, pulling her wrist free. She stared at him; took a deep breath.

"He's gonna die."

Shan glanced at the still figure in its pool of black blood, noting the ragged breath, and the sweat on the pale, unconscious face. He looked back to the Terran pilot.

"Perhaps not. Just a moment." He stepped forward, claiming the med tech's attention with a genteel cough and bowed when the man turned.

"Good-day. I am Shan yos'Galan Clan Korval, Captain of *Dutiful Passage*."

Recognition moved in the tech's eyes. "Captain yos'Galan, I am honored." He bowed, deeply.

Shan inclined of the head, then pointed across the room to the downed pilot.

"That person is one of my crewmen, med tech. His contract started today. I understand that you may not tend him, but my melant'i is clear. I require the use of your kit."

Relief flickered across the tech's face; he held the kit out with alacrity. "Certainly, sir. Please return it when you are through."

"I will," Shan inclined his head once again and turned, gathering the Terran pilot with a glance and lifted eyebrow.

"What'd you say?" she asked, following him to where her pilot lay, alone in the midst of all the official bustle.

"That I required the use of his kit in order to perform first aid on my crewman." Shan knelt down, heedless of the blood, and began to remove the towels she had used to try to staunch the blood.

"He ain't your crew," she protested.

"Ah, but he is a pilot, and I am partial to pilots. Besides, he might well have *been* mine, if he'd managed to stay out of trouble long enough to . . ." His breath caught. The wound was bad—deep and ragged. Immediately, reflexively, he ran a quick mental sequence to relax and focus himself.

"Knife," the Terran said, succinctly. "He took it for me. At least," she amended, as Shan opened the med kit and poked among the various tools of the tech's trade, "the first strike was meant for me. Got between me and the blade—I coulda handled it, but he's so *damned* fast. He'd've been OK, except the bum leg went out on him and the hood was on him like a terrier on a rat. . . ."

Shan had found what he was looking for—a suture gun. "Unpleasant, but effective," he commented, fingering the settings. "At least he's unconscious. We'll just do a quick

patch, I think—something to hold him together until we can get him up to the *Passage*."

The Terran blinked. "You're the guy the pilot was supposed to meet at the hall this morning."

He met her eyes. "In fact, I am—and I am remiss. My name is Shan yos'Galan Clan Korval."

She sucked air, eyes going wide. "Tree and Dragon," she said, possibly to herself, then inclined her head, roughly, but with good intent. "I'm Suzan Fillips."

Shan nodded. "Suzan Fillips, your pilot needs you. Please hold him while I do the patch."

She did, and Shan bent to the unpleasant task, sending up indiscriminate petitions to all the gods of mercy that the boy beneath his hand remain unconscious.

At last the thing was done. He set the suture gun aside and sat back on his heels. Suzan Fillips took her hands slowly from the downed pilot's shoulders and looked up.

"Tell me about this 'bad leg,'" Shan said. "Had he been injured before today?"

"He was in a crash not too long ago and the leg never healed right," Suzan said, meeting the eyes straitly. "You know about the crash—you're the Master Pilot. I remember your name from the report."

"Do you?" He look at her with renewed interest. "Where did you get the report, I wonder?"

She snorted. "I'm a registered pilot on this port. I used my card and pulled the file. Even Terrans hear rumors—and we'd heard one about a crackerjack pilot who'd been drummed outta the local Guild for not having the good taste to die in a crash. I read the reports—yours and the one they liked better. Tried to get the sim, too, but the Guild won't lend it."

The slanted white brows pulled together. "Won't lend it? Yet you are, as you point out, a pilot on this port."

"Jabun." The voice was faint and none too steady. Both Shan and Suzan jumped before staring down at the wounded pilot. His eyes were open, a dilated and glittering black, the brown hair stuck to his forehead in wet, straggling locks.

"Jabun," he repeated, the Liaden words running rapidly and not altogether in mode. "Not enough that they had me cast out. I must die the true death, if he must hire a wolf pack to the task. Dishonor. Danger! They must not find—" He struggled, trying to get his good arm around.

Shan put his hands firmly on the boy's shoulders. "Pilot. Be at ease."

The unseeing black eyes met his. "When will they have done?" he demanded. "When will they—"

Shan pushed, exerting force as well as force of will. "Lie down," he said firmly, in a mode perilously close to that he would use with a feverish child. "You are wounded and will do yourself further injury."

"Wound—" Sense flickered. "Gods." He twisted, weiky; Shan held him flat with no trouble.

"Suzan!"

She snapped forward, touching his unwounded shoulder. "Here, Pilot. I'm OK, see?"

Absolute Magnitude

Apparently, he did. The tension left him and he lay back, understanding in his eyes now. Shan frowned.

"You accuse Clan Jabun seriously," he said, in the Liaden mode of Comrade, and thinking of his own discoveries of the evening before. "Have you proof?"

"The pack leader . . ."

He glanced at Suzan, who jerked her head to the left, where two Port Proctors were talking to sullen man in a scarred leather jacket.

"All right," he said, in Terran, for Suzan Phillips' benefit. "I will speak to the pack leader. Pilot dea' Judan, you will remain here *quietly* with your co-pilot."

The glittering eyes stabbed his. "Yes."

One of the Proctors looked up as he approached and came forward to intercept him. "Master Trader?" he inquired courteously.

Shan considered him. "One hears," he said, delicately, "that yon brigand was hired by a House to deal death to a dead man."

The Proctor sighed. "It produces the name of Jabun—but this is not unusual you know, sir. They grasp at anything they hope will win them free of the present difficulty."

"Just so," Shan murmured, and drifted back toward Suzan Phillips and Ren Zel dea' Judan.

"I believe you," he said to the wounded pilot's hot eyes, and looked thoughtfully at the Terran.

From the entrance came the sounds of some slight agitation among the guards, who parted to admit a pilot of middle years, his pale hair going to gray, his leather gleaming as if new-made.

"It's him!" shouted the man who had been the wolf pack leader, and was silenced by his guards.

A Proctor moved forward, holding his hands up to halt the newcomer.

"Sir, this is the scene of a death by misadventure; I must ask you to leave unless you—"

"Ah, is it a death?" The man's face displayed such joy that Shan swallowed, revolted. "I must see for myself!"

The Proctor moved his hand as if to deny, but another signed assent and the three of them strode across the room to the covered form.

"Your Lordship is to understand that this is . . . unpleasant," the first Proctor said. "The nose has been forcibly crushed into the brain by a blow. . . ."

"That is of no matter," the newcomer snapped, "show me!"

The Proctors exchanged glances, then bent and lifted the covering back. Shan rose to his feet, eyes on His Lordship's proud, eager face, glowing with an anticipation so—

"What nonsense is this?" the man shouted. "This is not he!"

"I am here . . . Suzan, help me stand. Jabun, I am here!"

The voice was barely a croak, nearly inaudible. The bloodied figure gained his feet, more than half-supported by his grim-faced co-pilot.

"The dead man you want . . . the dead man you want is here!" Ren Zel grit out, and Shan stepped back, giving Jabun clear sight of his victim.

"You!" Jabun flung forward one step, hatred plain in his comely face, then froze, as if he had abruptly understood what he had done.

"Speaking to a dead man?" Ren Zel rasped. "Out of Code, Jabun." He drew a sobbing breath. "Look on me—dead by your malice. One death was not enough, one Balance insufficient . . ." He swayed and Shan moved to offer his support as well. Ren Zel gasped.

"You, who deals in life and death—you will be the death of all you are pledged to hold!"

A gasp ran through the room, and Shan felt a tingle in the close air of the poolroom, as if a thunderstorm were charging.

Jabun stood as if struck; and Shan heard a med tech mutter, "Jabunza, you fool! Will you play Balance games against a wizard?"

Ren Zel straightened, informed by an energy that had nothing to do with physical strength.

"Jabun, you are the last delm of your House. The best of your line shall lifemate a Terran to escape your doom. The rest of your kin will flee; they will deny their name and their blood, and ally themselves with warehousemen and fisherfolk for the safety such alliances buy!"

"Hear me, Jabun! In my blood is told your tale—witness all, all of you see him! See him as he is!"

"Pilot—" began Suzan, but Shan doubted Ren Zel heard her worried murmur, lost as he was in the dubious ecstasy of a full Foretelling.

"It is Jabun the pod-pirate," he cried, and Shan felt the hairs raise on his arms, recalling his own researches. "Jabun the thief! Jabun the murderer! Beware of his House and his money!"

The poolroom was so completely quiet that Shan heard his own heartbeat, pounding in his ears.

Jabun was the first to recover, to look around at the faces that would not—quite—return his regard.

"Come, what shall you? This—this is a judged and Balanced murderer, dead to Code, clan and kin. It is raving, the shame of its station has no doubt broken its wits. We have no duty here. It is beneath our melant'i to notice such a one."

"Then why," came the voice of man Suzan had identified as the wolf pack leader, "did you give us a cantra piece to beat him to death?"

Jabun turned and stared at his questioner, moved his shoulders under the bright leather. "Proctors, silence that person."

"Perhaps," murmured one of the two who had shown him the dead brigand. "I fear I must ask you to remain here with us, Your Lordship. We have some questions that you might illuminate for us."

"I?" Jabun licked his lips. "I think not."

Changeling

"We have authority here, sir," the second Proctor said, and stepped forward, beckoning. "This way, if you will, Your Lordship."

"Of your kindness, pilots," Ren Zel dea'Judan said, his Liaden slurring and out of mode, "I would sit. . ."

Shan and Suzan got him into a chair, where he sagged for a moment before reaching out none-too-steadily to touch his co-pilot's sleeve

"Tell Christopher," he managed, and his Terran was blurred almost out of sense. "I—apologize. The hall—his pilots—I did not know. It is not done. . ."

Suzan patted his knee. "It's OK, pilot. You leave Chris to me."

Shan nodded, reached into his sleeve and pulled out a card. He held it out to Suzan Phillips, who blinked and shook her head.

Patently, he held the card extended, and looked seriously into her eyes.

"Should you find yourself at risk over this incident," he said, "use the beam code on the card."

She licked her lips. "I—"

"Take. It." The wounded pilot's voice was barely audible, but the note of command was strong. The woman's hand rose. She slipped the card out of Shan's fingers and slid it immediately into her license pocket.

"Good," said Ren Zel, and Shan saw now only a wounded pilot, with no trace of the power of Foretelling, nor voice of command. . .

There was a clatter at the door. Shan looked around and spied Vilt and Rusty of his own crew, raised a hand, and then glanced down at Ren Zel dea'Judan.

"Pilot, I offer you contract: A Standard year's service on

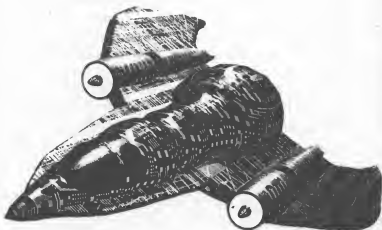
the *Dutiful Passage*, after which we will renegotiate or, if you wish, you will be set down on the world of your choice."

Ren Zel swallowed, and looked up to meet his gaze firmly. "You are Liaden," he managed. "I am dead."

"No," Shan said, earnestly. "You really must allow my skill to be better than that."

Almost, it seemed that the wounded boy smiled. The lids drooped over the fevered eyes.

"I accept," he murmured. "One Standard year."



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Joe Mayhew A Memorial by Warren Lapine

It is with great sadness that I pass the news on to you of Joe Mayhew's passing. As many of you know Joe has been the lead reviewer for *Absolute Magnitude* for several years. When I first started going to conventions to promote this new magazine that I was going to put out most of the SF professionals dismissed me immediately saying essentially, "Talk to me once you've put out an issue." Joe, who at the time was the science fiction recommending officer to the Library of Congress, sat down with me and asked me what I knew about copyright. Precious little: Joe walked me through the process, and he actually did all the paperwork to get *Harsh Mistress* its ISSN. Joe spent hours with me giving me a great deal of advice on how to proceed, and his perspective as a long time fan was invaluable to me. Once I published the first issue of *Harsh Mistress*, most SF professionals then said, "Talk to me if you're still around in a year." Joe, of course, sat down with me and went over the magazine page by page. Over the next couple of years his advice was invaluable. I was very happy when I offered Joe a position as a reviewer and he accepted. It was Joe's idea that we also cover small press magazines since no one of any appreciable size was doing that. We both felt that letting people know about these

magazines would make for a less inhospitable climate for them. Whenever I was feeling down or business wasn't going as well as I would have liked, I picked up the phone and called Joe. He'd unfailingly remind me that I was doing god's work, as it were, in the SF field and that, from his point of view, no one else was willing to put the success of the science fiction field ahead of their own and that I had to keep on pushing forward. Those talks got me through some dark hours. I will miss Joe tremendously. This issue of *Absolute Magnitude* is dedicated to his memory.

Joe Mayhew, long-time science fiction fan and for many the heart at the center of the Washington Science Fiction Association, passed away at 9 a.m. on June 10th, 2000. Joe was an active science fiction fan all of his life. He won the 1997 Hugo award for cartooning and was also nominated for 1990, 1996, and 1999. His cartoons have appeared in *Asimov's*, *Analog*, *Pirate Writings*, and numerous fanzines. As the Library of Congress' Recommending Officer for Science Fiction, Joe developed the official government definition of what was science fiction. In his last years, Joe became a professional science fiction author with stories appearing in *Tomorrow*, *Aberrations*, and *Aboriginal SF*.

He also reviewed science fiction books for the *Washington Post*, *Absolute Magnitude*, and TV's *Fast Forward*.

Joe chaired the 1987 Disclave and the canceled 1998 Disclave. He served as WSFA Secretary and editor of the WSFA Journal several times, most recently 1995-1996. He was the club's unofficial greeter of new people and storehouse of information about the club's history, its constitution, parliamentary procedure, and indeed everything else.

Joe died of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (the hospital's best guess), a relative of Mad Cow Disease that is considered extremely rare in the U.S. He is survived by a brother, a sister, and multiple cartoons and carvings.



Book Reviews

Review by Joe Mayhew

On Blue's Waters by Gene Wolfe
Tor, 381 pages, \$24.95
ISBN 0-312-86614-3

In Gene Wolfe's writing, mankind is his own chimera. Each of his characters is founded in careful and sometimes painful self-recognition of his own species—our quirks, ignorances, lies, and occasional graces. This first volume of his third series is set in the universe of his *New Sun* and *Long Sun* books, and it is as demanding and dangerous a read as each new book by Wolfe have proven to be. The reader looking for something to read on the bus probably will find it baffling. However, the careful reader who likes to lose himself in some edgeless place of the mind, and who visualizes what he reads, will find it uniquely satisfying. For Gene Wolfe conjures pictures which continue beyond their frames, and even persist long after the last page.

On Blue's Waters is told as a first-person narrative by Horn, the disciple and biographer of Patera Silk, the inspired hero of the "Book of the Long Sun" series. Horn has settled on Blue, a planet of the "short" sun. It is a frontier world, re-building, mostly from the resources of the mind, the basics of civilization. Horn has become a paper maker, living with his wife, Nettle, and their children on an island in the sea. But it isn't all Swiss Family Robinson. There is a heart-rending conflict between Horn and his son, Sinew. He reluctantly abandons his beloved wife and his own identity, becoming Patera Silk for a community that needs his leadership.

There is another planet in orbit around the short sun, called Green. It is the source of a predatory race, the

inhumi, which periodically invade Blue. But these are not simple vampire critters. One of their number had passed for human and actually became the head of Horn's religion back on the *Whorl*, the generation starship that brought him to Blue—and he was a humane, compassionate man, though not a man at all.

Horn is selected by the local business leaders to sail to a place that still has a lander that works, and that has offered to take someone from every settlement back up to the *Whorl*. Horn's community wants him to bring back Patera Silk. The people of Blue have faith that Silk can pull their society together. It will be a risky journey, and it will not lead down any of the obvious paths. Wolfe never does.

There is material in this book which harkens back to the "Long-Sun" volumes, but not presented in a way to make it necessary to have read those volumes before reading *On Blue's Waters*. Still, the references do make a difference in the meaning of the book, and are not merely tie-ins.

Wolfe tells his story from several perspectives in time, and fills in the details and meaning obliquely and in such a way that the reader must stay alert. But there is a big payoff for the alert reader.

And yet, someone could read this book as a simple adventure, and enjoy just that, if that is all they want from a book. But with Wolfe, there is always a lot more, enough to raise a second crop of ideas, and a third. You always get something worth more than one read out of a book by Gene Wolfe. By the way, for those Oreb fans among you, he's back.

There will be two more volumes to this book: *In Green's Jungles*, scheduled for August 2000, and *Return to the Whorl*, scheduled to come out next year.

Reviews by John Deakins

The Fifth Elephant by Terry Pratchett
HarperCollins, 321 pages, \$24.00
ISBN 0-06-105157-8

Pratchett's twenty-fourth Discworld novel has nothing to do with the movie of similar name. The four great elephants who support Discworld on the back of a gargantuan turtle once had a fifth companion, who fell off. A looping orbit caused him to collide with what is now Uberwald, leaving behind the titanic deposits of minerals and fat found there today. The fifth elephant became the symbol of Uberwald, thus the symbol of anything showing a false front. Uberwald, you see, is the home of trolls and dwarves, but most importantly, of shape-changing vampires and werewolves.

Commander Vinfes, copper supreme of the Ankh-Mopork constabulary, must assist the Uberwald dwarves to recover the Scone of Stone, the dwarven-bread rock on which the next king must be crowned. Officially, he must travel as Sir Samuel Vimes, diplomat, with his duchess wife, an account/assassin/spy, a female dwarf, and a troll constable (with the world's biggest crossbow) trailing behind.

Opposing him are various dwarf factions who think Ankh-Mopork's modern dwarves are destroying tradition. Worse, a group of regenerating neo-Nazi nobles/werewolves would prefer to return to the old, bloody Uberwald wars and ways. They have already hunted to death Ankh-Mopork's only Uberwald agent. Vimes' one so-so ally is an ancient vampire noblewoman, who has added another "... Anonymous" to the list of international organizations. Perhaps he can depend on the wolves, who have good reason to dislike werewolves, and the Irgors—perennial, lipping Uberwald servants who are the

Absolute Magnitude

ultimate in organ donors and recipients.

Against that backdrop, Vimes has only to solve a couple of murders, a few sinister disappearances, and the theft of the most important object in the kingdom. Oh, and he has to elude a pack of unkillable lycanthropic wolves who plan to hunt him down in the snow. Pretty serious, huh? Pratchett will still make you laugh as he deflates a new set of human foibles (whether found in dwarves, werewolves, vampires, Igors, or policemen). This series is almost legendary for having more staying power than the Energizer Bunny. Here is another one. Enjoy it!

Timeline by Michael Crichton; Alfred A. Knopf, 443 pages, \$26.95
ISBN: 0-679-44481-5

Timeline sets out to do for time travel what *Jurassic Park* did for cloning extinct organisms. Human characters collide, not so much with super-science, but with its implications. A group of historians, archaeologists, and architects, sponsored by a multinational corporation, have been excavating and restoring a medieval French castle. The ruthless corporation head plans to use time traveling knowledge to recreate the ultimate in realistic theme-parks.

Time travel's science is based on a quantum mechanics multiverse, similar to Barnes' *Finito* or Pohl's *Coming of the Quantum Cats*. (Oh, boy! Real science! We won't be jerked around by gee-whiz pseudo-science gadgetry.)

When the chief historian discovers the reason behind their work, he insists on personal experience, and is trapped in the past. His three assistants become the rescue mission. From that point, forget quantum mechanics; think *Indiana Jones*, with conniving, rapacious knights instead of ruthless Nazis. The reader will spend so much time cliff-hanging that

the conquest of Everest will seem trivial. That is the book's greatest strength: Crichton knows how to write action scenes. That is the book's weakest aspect, because he sometime he cheats on his logic and (Gee whiz!) science for the sake of that action.

The characters are immersed in realistic Middle Ages violence and intrigue, but when they are forced into a joust, somehow they "borrow" armor and horses. That rare, expensive equipage seems to evaporate immediately afterward. The explanation of how they rematerialize in another universe is thin, quantum mechanics or no quantum mechanics, though Crichton does bypass temporal paradox handily. The ending is a little predictable and slightly weak.

Timeline visits an era often neglected by alternate history and time-travel fiction. Like *Jurassic Park*, the action creates a totally enjoyable page-turner. After a slow start, I was always ready to read what happened next. To fully enjoy it, however, don't look too closely under the robes and jerkins, or you will spot a pair of Levis.

Reviews by Michael M. Jones

Past Lives, Present Tense
Edited by Elizabeth Ann Scarborough
Ace Books, 352 pages, \$13.00
ISBN 0441-00649-3

Every good story begins with a "What If?" This one is no different. *Past Lives, Present Tense* is an anthology that answers fifteen variations on one very profound "What If?"

Simply put, "What if" you could bring the dead back to life, and literally download their personalities, memories, thoughts, and their very essences into modern day people? Imagine the possibilities. For a steep price, if the essence existed, you could have, say, William Shakespeare downloaded into your mind. You'd

literally share your mind with the Bard of Avon. You'd be privy to his creative impulses, his memories, his gifts, his flaws . . . everything. And you'd either share your head with him, or the two of you would merge into one person, a hybrid of yesterday and today.

There are only a few catches to this scenario. First, you need to have access to the person's DNA. Blood, hair, skin samples, bone fragments, anything at all that might bear the genetic coding of the donor. And while this might not seem so hard, just remember, it's not always easy to get what you want, and not everything is as it seems. Tests are only so accurate, after all. Then there's the price. It's not cheap, but luckily, the high costs include fees for acquisition, testing and downloading. Finally, you only have a limited amount of time to get used to your new mental roommate before it's permanent. Don't get along with your great-grandfather? Really hate having Mozart as a companion? You only have six weeks, at the most, to change your mind. After that, no exchanges, no refunds. And the donor must be dead. No using the living in the process.

Still interested? Welcome to the early years of the Twenty-First century, in which Doctors Tsering and Chime have pioneered such a process. Of course, when Dr. Tsering tested it out by downloading his dead wife, Dr. Chime, and became the hybrid being known as Dr. Chimera, s/he became the very first, and very visible success of Nucore, Inc.

And just like that, the world is a much different place. No longer does a barrier separate the living, and the dead. The past is easily-accessible, and a great many people choose to undergo the process for a multitude of reasons.

Fifteen fascinating, provocative stories explore this world from all angles. The opening story, "Soulmates" by Elizabeth Ann

Primary Ignition

Scarborough, sets up the scenario, and introduces Dr. Chimera, Nucore, and the theme of the anthology. A host of talented writers, including Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Margaret Ball, Elizabeth Moon, Janet Berliner, and David Bischoff, tackle the subject matter with surprising quality. Usually, in an anthology like this, most of the stories will be adequate, some will disappoint, and a few will excel.

I found the majority of the stories in this anthology to be above average. For instance, in "Sittin' On The Dock," David Bischoff takes on the idea of a black market for DNA personas, and looks at what happens when a former "boy band" member (The Alley Guys . . . sound vaguely familiar?) decides to legitimize his singing talents by downloading Otis Redding. That's right, Otis Redding. The result isn't quite as expected.

In "Voyage of Discovery," by Nina Kiriki Hoffman, a comatose girl is brought back to the real world after Meriweather Lewis, the explorer, is introduced into her mind. The result is a personal voyage of discovery, and a rite of passage, not just for the girl, but for her overprotective mother.

An inventor with too much time and money on his hands decides to tackle the perpetual motion machine, after solving cold fusion. When his experiments continually fail, who does he turn to, but Leonardo da Vinci, in Jerry Olton's "Renaissance Man." In the process, he solves more than one problem of his own.

Not one, but two distinctly different takes on someone who might, or might not be, Jesus Christ, take place in Margaret Ball's "Shell Game," and Kristine Kathryn Rusch's "Relics." Needless to say, things are never what they appear to be. "Relics" addresses the moral and religious quandries involved in possibly bringing back Jesus, while "Shell Game" looks at the lengths one man must go to in order to save his country.

Meanwhile, in Lillian Stewart Carl's story, "A Rose With All Its Thorns," a radical feminist comes to terms with the idea and the reality behind Anne Boleyn, and discovers herself along the way.

Elizabeth Moon tackles a different subject in "Silver Lining," when a egocentric fencer decides to invoke the aid of legendary fencer George Silver, and winds up with much, much more than he bargained for.

War-gaming takes on a whole new aspect, when a combination of robots, volunteers, and downloaded personalities are used to revisit the Civil War in life size detail, culminating in the return of General J.E.B. Stuart, Abraham Lincoln, and more, in Rod Garcia y Robertson's "Forever Free."

Healing is the name of the game when Carole Nelson Douglas examines the use of Florence Nightengale to help heal an autistic girl, in "Night Owl." And that's not all . . . other stories invoke Babe Ruth, Mata Hari, Edgar Allan Poe, Saint Elspeth, Doc Holliday, and even Walter Scott.

Trust me when I say that I'm not giving anything away by sharing the list of historical personages resurrected in this anthology. The true fun lies in just how each writer handles their chosen subject, bringing them to life in new and unexpected ways. Theirs is a delicate task, giving long-dead people a chance to shine in the sun, while still remaining true to the people they were. How much was legend, and how much fact? We may never know for real, but these authors certainly give it a fair shot.

Normally, I'd expect to gloss over two or three stories in an anthology of this size, just going by averages of quality and subject matter. Here, I didn't skip a one. They range in tone, from introspective, to gently humorous, to deadly serious, but they all rate high on the quality scale. And although the setting is, by default, one of science fiction, these stories are, for

the most part, rooted in a world we can easily understand. Place it in whatever genre you will, but don't shun it just because the spine labels it as science fiction.

This is one of those rare anthologies which rises above the rest, in subject matter and consistency, and I'd be delighted if the concept was explored in a second volume somewhere down the road. Certainly, we've only touched upon the tip of the iceberg. This book comes highly recommended.

Valor's Choice, by Tanya Huff
Daw, 407 pages, \$6.99
ISBN 0-88677-896-4

Tanya Huff is best known for her works of fantasy (the Four Quarters series) and dark/urban fantasy (the Victoria Nelson: Investigator series). Thus, it comes as a change of pace, and a somewhat surprising one, that her most recent release would be a science fiction military novel.

It all starts when the grouping of alien races known as the Confederation is threatened by the aggressive Others. To combat this problem, the more enlightened races of the Confederation recruit younger, aggressive races, such as the Krai, Taykan, and of course, Humans. In exchange for the keys to the stars, we gladly take on the task of defending the Confederation.

A new race, the reptilian Silsviss, has been discovered. Now it's a race against time to see if the Confederation will recruit the Silsviss, or if the Others will get there first and annihilate the species. To that end, a diplomatic envoy is sent to woo the Silsviss, with a select military unit dispatched as their honor guard. Among that unit is Staff Sergeant Torin Kerr, the point of view for *Valor's Choice*.

Unfortunately, what starts out as an easy mission soon becomes complicated, as they face intrigue from within and culture clashes from

Absolute Magnitude

without. And when the envoy, honor guard, and a Silsviss representative are trapped in a deadly situation, it'll take everything they have to stay alive.

Interestingly, part of this book is heavily based on the historical battle of Rorke's Drift, which was later popularized by the movie *Zulu*, with Michael Caine. However, Huff has wrapped a competent and fast-moving plot around that sequence, making this more than just another science fictional retelling of a historical event.

You may be able to take the author out of fantasy, but you can't always take fantasy out of the author. This is best demonstrated by the race known as the Taykan, which are, as described in the book, elves. Pointy ears, pastel hair, pheromones and sexual promiscuity, the whole nine yards. The Krai remind me of nothing so much as goblins, coming in as squat, ugly, and able to eat anything (including their opponents). Other races fall into the familiar pattern of following alternate evolutionary ladders, so besides the reptilian Silsviss, you have the arachnid Mikto, the ursine Dornagain, and the birdlike Rakva. At least, that's the general impression I got from each race as described.

Ultimately, Valor's Choice comes off as a rather decent book, if a departure from Huff's usual fare. It's a blend of space opera and military science fiction that grabs the attention and doesn't let go. Her writing is as crisp and engaging as ever, and the characters reasonably memorable. Unfortunately, coming on the tail of John Hemry's *Stark's War* (another military SF novel starring a sergeant), this book didn't quite live up to its promise. Close, satisfying, but it wasn't all that it could be. I do look forward to seeing if Huff plans any more books set in this same universe.

Tangled Up In Blue, by Joan D. Vinge

Tor, 235 pages, \$23.95
ISBN 0-312-87196-1

Welcome back to the world of Tiamat, where Arienrhod, the infamous and ageless Snow Queen, rules with an iron fist, casting a web of mystery and intrigue among the assorted factions who all seek control of her world. Always trying to find a way to break the technological stranglehold of the Galactic Hegemony, the Snow Queen plays one conspiracy off against another, uncaring as to who or what might get caught underfoot.

Nyx LaisTree is a Hegemonic Officer from the planet of Newhaven, stationed in the Tiamat city known as Carbuncle. He and his fellow Blues are good, loyal, obedient police, most of the time. However, every so often, they lash out at the frustrating regulations that restrict their power, and assume a vigilante role, during which time they strike out at the interstellar criminals protected by the Queen.

During one such vigilante operation, things go horribly wrong in a very messy manner, and before it's through, Nyx LaisTree is the only survivor, his partner and friends slaughtered. Suspended from the force, he has no recourse but to investigate the circumstances surrounding that tragic night. However, he'll need allies. With the aid of a hard-headed, idealistic Kharemaghi sergeant named Gundhalinu, and a shapeshifting spy/prostitute named Devony Seaward, Nyx will risk life and limb to expose the conspiracy that killed his friends, and find vengeance. Even if it kills him.

What *Tangled Up In Blue* is, essentially, is a police procedural with a conspiracy twist worthy of the X-Files. It's not so much about the Snow Queen as it is about her world, and the people that inhabit it. Through Nyx LaisTree and his erstwhile partners, we're taken on a dizzying

tour of the streets of Carbuncle, a grim and gritty investigation that leaves no stone uncovered and no hiding place undisturbed. As the truth begins to unfold and multiple layers are discarded, an even larger picture emerges, one presumably tying back to the other books in the same universe, especially *Snow Queen* and *Summer Queen*.

And therein lies my only complaint. While this book is expertly plotted, with sharp characterization and high-octane action, and described in such clarity that I could see it as though it were a movie, it leaves something to be desired in accessibility to the new reader. To get the full benefit of *Tangled Up In Blue* and its characters, one really should read *Snow Queen*, *Summer Queen*, and *World's End* first. There are plot hints and even characters who appear in *Tangled* who aren't fully explained, at least to my knowledge, and I can only assume that Vinge's other novels go into more detail. That, and a hefty hardback price for what is ultimately a comparatively short book, are the only real drawbacks to what is otherwise a superb novel. It's inspired me to seek out the first three books in the *Snow Queen* cycle as a result. From *Tangled*, it's easy to see how Vinge earned her reputation as a master storyteller.

Stark's War by John G. Hemry
Ace, 261 pages, \$5.99
ISBN 0-441-00715-5

In the not-so-distant future, the United States of America has emerged as the last true superpower, ruling the globe with an iron fist called the Pax America. However, one frontier remains free of their grip: the Moon. Here, various countries have seized control of its resources in an attempt to loosen the stranglehold America has on Earth, one last hope at finding their own measure of independence. However, claiming right of domain by virtue of the

Primary Ignition

original Moon landing in '69, America is willing to fight for dominance, dispatching troops into space to take back the last bastion of freedom, anyway they can.

In an army so wedded to high technology that a private can't even sneeze without being micromanaged by the brass, and so corrupt that an honest man stands a better chance of dying than being promoted, Sergeant Ethan Stark is the rare exception. Honest, blunt, fearless, and loyal to the extreme, he's dedicated to his men, and his job with a passion. This mission will test his resolve and his loyalties to the breaking point and beyond.

Newcomer John G. Hemry turns in a gripping tale of military science fiction, in the tradition of Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* and Haldeman's *Forever War*. It serves as both a cautionary fable and a science fiction adventure, doing dual purpose and succeeding on both levels. The future society it portrays is a horrifying one, where personal aggrandizement and promotion are far more important than quality or loyalty, where military battles have become popular entertainment, and where the common soldier is nothing but a pawn to be discarded carelessly by a ruthless Army made up of career officers and politicians. It takes the very worst elements of today's society and amplifies them in a logical manner, showing us a place where we very well might be someday.

Ethan Stark, the protagonist and voice of common sense and morality, is a good man, plain and simple, who joined the Army to make a difference and be part of something grander. The events of Stark's War force him to question everything he's ever believed in or upheld, and the choices he makes will affect not just him, but the entire Army, before it's over.

The characterization in this book, be it Stark, his closest friend Sergeant Vic Reynolds, or any of the many

enlisted men and women who get screen time, is right on. These are real people, dealing with real situations, often hamstrung by (admittedly over-the-top in some way) uncaring officers and arbitrary commands. When someone dies, you notice it. The plot is sharp and crisp, moving right along at a mounting pace until it reaches the point of no return. While it does give a defined resolution, it leaves things wide open for a sequel, which would hopefully explore the new status quo created by the events within.

This is a good book, a worthy debut from Hemry, and it has the potential to join the pantheon of classic military science fiction stories if it gets the attention it deserves. I plan to pass on a copy of this book to my father, who spent twenty-some years in the Army, and who introduced me to Heinlein and Haldeman. Give this one a try.

Contributor's Page

Allen Steele became a full-time science fiction writer in 1988, following publication of his first short story, "Live From The Mars Hotel" (*Asimov's*, mid-Dec. '88). Since then he has been a prolific author of novels, short stories, and essays, with his work appearing in England, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Brazil, Russia, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Japan. He has won two Hugo Awards and is hard at work on a new novel.

John Deakins is a retired science teacher. He has one novel, from Roc, to his credit: *Barrow*.

Joe Mayhew won the 1997 Hugo Award for best fan artist. Before retiring he was the science fiction recommender for the Library of Congress.

Dominic Emile Harman is a British artist who has just begun breaking into the U.S. market. His work has appeared in *Interzone* and *SF Age*. This is his fifth appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

Joseph Bellocatto Jr.'s work has been appearing in magazines for years. This is his second appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

Steve Miller has been a reviewer of music, books, and typewriters; a reporter, a professional chess tournament director, a librarian, an editor, and a resource specialist for a statewide electronic bulletin board system. He is married to **Sharon Lee**, with whom he has written a number of books in the Liaden universe.

Sharon Lee has owned a book store, delivered tractor trailers, and worked as an advertising copy writer. She is currently the executive secretary for SFFWA. She is married to **Steve Miller**, with whom she has written a number of books in the Liaden universe.

Jamie Wild makes his fifth appearance in the pages of *Absolute Magnitude*. He plays lead guitar, and occasionally sings badly, in a New York Metal band. He says he is trying to stay away from alternative rock and literary sf. "You can either sell out and try to impress people you don't like or have fun with it. I'm having fun!"

Linda J. Dunn started writing in 1993 and was nominated for the John W. Campbell award in 1995. By day, she is a computer specialist for DCMC, which is a branch of the Defense Logistics Agency. By night, she writes science fiction, fantasy, and horror. Her works have appeared in several magazines including *Dreams of Decadence*. This is her first appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

Mike Jones is an associate editor for *Absolute Magnitude* and does reviews for the Green Man web page.

